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"AMONG THE CUSHIONS, BESIDE THE BARONET."

Sir Archer's Bride; or, The Queen of His Heart.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

BOSOM FRIENDS.

Two villas—standing like twin sisters, side by side—with trim, well-kept lawns sloping gently down to the river's brink, alike in each and every particular within doors as without.

They were quiet households, each comprising a placid, prosperous married couple; and both homes at this time owed their sunshine to one young, loved face only.

Colonel Humphrey, it is true, boasted of the existence of a tall stripling, far away, who had been drafted at an early age into the ranks of the only profession to which, in his father's opinion, a gentleman should aspire.

Yet the young lieutenant was little more than a myth, without actual bodily presence, so far as life at the villa was concerned: albeit Mr. and Mrs. Hebden, next door, blessed by Providence with one fair-haired daughter only, considered even the existence of this absent son and heir a sort of personal grievance—a tacit reflection upon their

own sterile lot, barren of sons, endowed with one ewe-lamb only.

Pembridge Villas, forming as they did, one harmonious whole, detached from any neighboring residences, had evidently been designed by a far-seeing and enterprising builder, with a view to the accommodation of the families of some modern Damon and Pythias; for, assuredly, being cut off from general communion with one's kind is the best way of cementing that spurious commodity which is the best apology for friendship known to this, our nineteenth century world, between those thrown by Fate in contact.

Accordingly, the Humphreys and the Hebden were "great friends;" which phrase, translated into every-day English, is intended to convey that the intimacy between the households was extreme.

That in this intimacy lurked a certain leaven of rivalry, it is almost unnecessary to explain.

The cold December afternoon upon which this story opens, found Ellen Humphrey and Nellie Hebden in close conclave together.

Within closed doors and basking in the glow of a blazing yule-log fire, the girls could well afford to forget the dull, leaden sky without, snow-covered garden paths, the murky, swollen river, and, indeed, all those minor disadvantages which rendered the villas, in the opinion of most folks, anything but desirable residences in the dreary winter months.

"I am so very glad you enjoyed yourself, dear!" said Nellie Hebden, from her seat on the fender ottoman.

But even as she spoke, she looked wistfully into the fire; for, perhaps she began to weary somewhat of listening to the elder girl's voluble recital of the delights of last evening's gathering at The Laurels—a gathering to which Nellie had likewise been bidden; but parental authority had interposed, sternly forbidding the entrance of this eager Peri to the smiling lands so nearly within her reach.

For not until Christmas Day would Nellie have completed her seventeenth year; and her father persisted that, until this rubicon was passed, nothing less than a royal mandate should induce him to consent to his little maid's gracing any Terpsichorean festival.

Perhaps he was right.

Nellie was young enough, and fair enough, to require parental vigilance; still, now that the hour of emancipation from the restrictions of girlhood drew near, she felt it doubly hard to be denied access to that reseat fairyland, whose pleasant paths in another week she would be free to tread.

Besides, according to Ellen Humphrey's account, never before, and never again, would mortals taste of bliss so unalloyed as that which had fallen to the lot of the fortunate fifty gathered within the hospitable walls of The Laurels the previous night.

It *did* seem, perhaps, a little hard to have missed such exquisite enjoyment, just because one was not yet seventeen.

"And my dress was truly lovely!" Miss Humphreys proceeded, regardless of Nellie's ejaculation; likewise of the fact that she had already three times fully exhausted this head of the argument. "I could see how vexed the Heywards were. Those girls look positive frights in pink. And then mine was so much paler, and the quality of the silk so far richer than theirs, that no wonder they felt themselves quite in the shade. Charlie Derwent declared he had never seen me look half so lovely!" Ellen added, with a little laugh of pretended incredulity, which by no means disguised her secret complacency. "And although one cannot believe half *he* says, yet really I think I looked my best."

"I'm sure you did, dear!" echoed Nellie, in all good faith; for she had assisted at the toilet, and given "finishing touches," with unaffected admiration of her friend's dark, southern beauty, set off to infinite advantage by her tasteful evening costume. "So, for once, Derwent spoke the truth. It is not often one can

say as much for him. Was he vexed to see the impression you effected upon the Baronet?"

"Need you ask! He was positively savage, my dear, which added to the fun. Well, one can dance with Derwent any day; but baronets and M.P.s are scarce, unhappily, in these parts," laughed the beauty, scornfully, fully alive to the deplorable fact that she was doomed to waste her sweetness on the desert air of the old fashioned little town of Luton, while entitled, by her transcendent attractions, to bloom to greater advantage in the great London show of rank and fashion.

"And you really liked this Sir Archer?" questioned Nellie, simply.

"Well, who could fail to like the one man of importance in the room, if he singled you out from all others as the recipient of his undivided attention for an entire evening? Particularly when one enjoys the pleasing consciousness that all the other girls are mad with disappointment, and that *one* man, at any rate, is white with jealousy and rage. For every girl, of course, expected to be introduced to Sir Archer, and, no doubt, at least a score were determined to create an impression. Whereas, I don't believe he did more than six dances altogether; and three times out of those six I had the honor of being his partner. Then, of course, our fair hostess expected he would conduct one of her three Gorgons in to supper. I declare I could hardly appear decorously unmoved when he advanced toward me, requesting the felicity, *et cetera*, *et cetera*. I rose with much dignity, I flatter myself; yet I was more than half disposed to jump with joy."

And Ellen laughed with exuberant glee at the mere recollection of past triumph.

"Yes, it must have been most flattering!" echoed Nellie, gravely. "But, dear Ellen, I do think you were cruel to—to vex Derwent. You know he is no favorite of mine; still, I believe he really loves you. And you have led him to believe that—that you, in some measure, return his affection."

"And so I do," retorted Ellen. "But surely it is no fault of mine that the man is not in a position to propose? If we were properly engaged, you know, it would be different. As it is—"

"Well, dear—as it is?" questioned Nellie, looking at her expectantly.

"As it is," replied the elder girl, slowly, and with deliberate emphasis, "although I am really fond of Derwent, I do not intend to debar myself from any enjoyment that comes in my way. Moreover, should an unexceptionable wooer present himself, I—well—I think I should accept him, Nell. I am old enough to be engaged."

"Oh, Ellen, Ellen! You cannot mean it! You love Derwent, you admit. Surely, then, you would not, you *could* not marry any other man?"

"You dear little simpleton!" laughed Miss Humphrey, with an air of infinite superiority. "Suppose now, only suppose, a man like Sir Archer should ask me to share his name and fortune, his rank and position, think you I should be mad enough, wicked enough I might almost say, to reject him for the sake of a penniless barrister, like Charlie Derwent? Nellie, little stupid though you be, you can hardly believe *that*!"

"Oh, Ellen!" rejoined the younger girl, genuinely shocked—"you surely cannot mean that you would even hesitate to refuse him? But what can have put such an idea into your head? Men of the stamp you mention are rare in Luton, so your constancy is not likely to be put to the test. There is really no one of much importance, save—save Sir Archer, of course."

"Well! and why consider him out of the question? You will laugh at me, Nell, I dare say, but really I should not be immensely surprised, considering how far matters progressed last night—upon a first introduction, remember—if—if—well—if Sir Archer ultimately came to the point. They say he means to marry; and there is, moreover, a rumor afloat that, to ingratiate himself with his constituents, he has

determined to select one from among the innumerable marriageable girls of Luton. Then why not your humble servant, as well as another? Would it not be delightful to write 'lady' before one's name, instead of Miss, or even Mrs.? Why, Nell, you would shine with a reflected luster, if only as 'milady's friend!'"

"Can you mean it, Ellen?" cried Nellie, starting to her feet. "Oh, surely you are jesting? Why, Sir Archer is quite old!"

"Quite old, you little goose! Since when were bachelors, with inexhaustible check-books, pronounced old at thirty-seven? Save by your sixteen summers, dearest, I assure you unmarried baronets and M.P.s under forty are regarded by all spinsters as objects of profoundest admiration. And Sir Archer is really charming; and—he certainly pressed my hand at parting, standing bare-headed in the frosty night air; and himself insisted upon holding open the carriage door. Besides, he was so unfeignedly delighted at the prospect of our meeting again at the Hamlyns' on the twenty-ninth. What should all that mean? Ah, by the by, my simple Nell will make her first appearance there! You will be at the Hamlyns' yourself; and even if you are not introduced to him, you will see this delightful Member of ours, and judge for yourself whether his attentions to a certain dark-eyed friend of yours, are not what mammas call 'most particular.'"

We need not pursue the conversation through all those diverse channels into which it flowed unwearily for the next half-hour. The girls were in a confidential mood to-day, and when two maidens—neither of whom have numbered twenty summers—meet, and there is a ball in the past, and one in the future, open to discussion, small wonder if the discourse extend beyond the limits of ordinary endurance.

I will only add that when Nellie Hebden parted from her friend, with warm embraces and many protestations on both sides of meeting "without fail" upon the morrow, her own anticipations of the long-talked-of ball upon the twenty-ninth were not quite so joyous as they hitherto had been.

She could hardly account satisfactorily for so strange a circumstance. It could not surely be that she felt the prospect of the coming pleasure already somewhat dimmed by the certainty that her friend's brilliant triumph must effectually eclipse any modest impression she herself had been hopeful and desirous of effecting in the somewhat circumscribed arena of their small Luton world!

Perhaps; for surely in all maiden breasts, however artless and free of guile, lurks, even though unconfessed, a natural desire to shine.

CHAPTER II.

NELLIE'S DEBUT.

THE Hamlyns knew all the nicest people in the town and neighborhood, and on the evening of the twenty-ninth the elegant suit of reception rooms at The Cedars was crowded to excess.

Every one had been informed that this entertainment—like, indeed, most other gatherings of any pretensions in Luton—had been arranged to do honor to "Our Member," who was spending the festive season at a recently-purchased country seat in the neighborhood, and had undoubtedly manifested praiseworthy alacrity in mingling, on all possible occasions, in the society of the foremost "set" of his constituents.

Yet it was well known that in London every Belgravian mansion was open to Sir Archer; in each club, in every drawing-room, he was deemed a valuable addition by both sexes among the "Upper Ten." Hence his extreme affability was the more appreciated by those worthy, yet undeniably hum-drum, Luton Joneses, Browns, and Robinsons, who were permitted in this long-to-be remembered year of grace to bask freely in the sunshine of the Member's presence.

It happened that Mrs. Hebden and her daughter were among the latest arrivals at the brilliantly-lighted portals of The Cedars. At

the last moment, Mr. Hebden—somewhat autocratic in the domestic circle—had decided, when Nellie—radiant, blushing and excited—presented herself for parental criticism, that the great frosted marguerites which looped her fleecy draperies here and there were scattered about her silken train with a too lavish hand.

And so Janet was summoned, and some modification of existing floral arrangements was insisted on. Papa disapproved, too, of the ivy-wreath with which his small daughter's Grecian head was crowned; and so this, in turn, had to give way for a cluster of white, starry daisies, which nestled shyly among her blonde curls.

Yet such suggestions at the last moment, however well-intentioned, are apt to "fluster" (as the ladies'-maids phrase it) even more self-assured *debutantes* than our diffident little friend of seventeen summers.

In her case, the result of papa's disapproval, and the consequent alterations in her toilet, was well-nigh disastrous.

Previously, she had been excited and nervous in the highest degree at the actual approach of that critical moment when, bursting out of the chrysalis of girlhood, she should be fully launched as one of the butterflies of life in the sunshine of that gay world which, to all such young and giddy fluttering things, appears but one brilliant parterre of endless pleasures. The temporary check to her high spirits exercised a violent reactionary effect; the girl felt painfully hysterical, and only by the strongest self-control restrained that violent flood of causeless tears which threatened, during the drive, to chase the luster from her eyes, and rob her of all chance of "a success" on that ever-memorable evening!

"Oh, mamma, I—indeed I don't feel well!" she faltered, as she followed Mrs. Hebden into the elegantly-appointed retiring-room, where a smart lady's maid—much beribboned and beflounced—was in attendance to relieve the guests of wraps and shawls. "I—I am sure I cannot dance to-night! Dear mamma, should you mind *very* much if—if we returned home—now, at once?"

"You must be mad, my dear!" calmly retorted the matron, shaking out her rustling draperies, and surveying the general effect in a long mirror with infinite complacency. "Is the company very numerous, Fanchette?"

"Yes, indeed, madam. And the ladies' dresses are quite helegant—that I *must* say, after many years' experience! Our Member, ma'am—Sir Harcher Trenton—I myself hovered to say as how he never scarcely recollected to have seen so many sweet young creatures so tastefully harranged—they was his very words, ma'am—in all his life before! He said that much to master, to my certain knowledge, and—Oh, miss, surely you've lost a flower, just above your flounces—here!" And the well-meaning Abigail bent down with much anxiety to arrange poor Nellie's train.

"Oh, mamma, my dress is spoiled! Papa would cut those flowers off, and only see—what a hideous space! Oh, I look a fright!—and, indeed, I don't feel well! Let us, dear mamma, go home. No one, I am sure, will ask me to dance!"

"Rubbish, my child! Here, button my glove!"

And, despite a quivering lip, cheeks burning furiously with nervous excitement, and a sickening sense of her own shortcomings, slender Nellie, in her modest toilet of simple white, had no choice but to follow her complacent chaperone into the brilliantly-lighted room—thronged, surely, as it seemed to Nell, with the grandest and most imposing company ever gathered together within four walls. What silks!—what satins!—what wreaths and feathers! Ah, how pitifully mean her own simple attire—denuded even of the flowers which had been its one redeeming point! She must inevitably be overlooked; not a single partner would present himself; who would notice a dowdy, insignificant little maid like her? Even Fanchette had noted the deficiencies of her

dress! Oh, the humiliation of subsiding into a wall-flower upon one's very first introduction to society!

Full of these horrible forebodings of the fate in store for her, Nellie sunk, with a beating heart into a seat beside her mother. Raising her eyes for the first time, and venturing to glance around the room, she beheld Ellen Humphrey herself, arrayed in softly-shimmering silken robes, of palest cerulean blue. How exquisite she looked! reflected Nellie. And, oh, what a number of sweet pink rose-buds trailed here, there, everywhere—on skirt, and train, and bodice! Ah! if only Nellie's own modest marguerites had been spared, she would not have felt so utterly disconsolate.

With what rapt admiration, too, Ellen's partner was bending forward to look at her face? Why—yes, surely! Nellie could not be mistaken! That must be Sir Archer?—yet how different was his appearance in the evening dress to when she had seen him, for the first and last time, upon the day of the election.

And now the Member looked across the room, and evidently made some remark concerning *her*; for Ellen Humphrey, following the direction of his glance, smiled and nodded at poor Nellie, whose cheek grew hotter still as the terrible fear came upon her that perhaps even those two were commenting on the deficiencies of her toilet.

Just then the music ceased, and Nellie noted that the gilded clock upon a console-table pointed to eleven. Three hours at least before the company would disperse! Three dreary hours of unutterable humiliation to be endured, before the anguish of her "first ball" would be numbered among the chronicles of the past!

CHAPTER III.

MAY AND DECEMBER.

"Oh, mamma, I cannot go! Indeed—indeed I cannot!" pleaded Nellie, a few brief hours later.

"But, my dear child, it is nearly three o'clock, and the rooms are emptying fast!" urged her mother, glancing round.

"Yet, indeed, I cannot spare your daughter, Mrs. Hebden. You must be indulgent, and grant us still further respite. I know not what would induce me to relinquish the pleasure of this last valse. Not even the fear of incurring your displeasure, I am bold enough to say."

The speaker was Sir Archer, who glanced from the mother with such intensity of admiration to the fair, flushed, disheveled Nellie (who leant panting on his arm), that even maternal determination gave way beneath the influence of a Baronet's smile.

So Mrs. Hebden discreetly beat a retreat, and Sir Archer, in tones of infinite solicitude, questioned whether, indeed, his little partner was not beginning to weary of the dance?

Nellie admitted—not that she was tired of dancing—oh, no! who, indeed, ever heard such a confession from the lips of seventeen?—but that her toes—"only just her toes"—began to ache a little.

So Sir Archer was magnanimous, and led the girl aside to a snugly-sheltered seat beneath a colossal vase of drooping ferns. He did not mean to relinquish her to the enemy just yet. Decidedly not! He had foregone the promised dance out of "consideration for her toes;" but meant to have compensation in the shape of conversation, at any rate.

"And so you have enjoyed your first ball?" he asked, almost tenderly—for, indeed, after no less than four previous dances, to say nothing of the long interlude of supper to which the grave Member had escorted the little *debutante*, small wonder that these two were "quite at home" in each other's society.

"Oh, more than ever I had imagined possible!" Nellie candidly avowed, raising her flushed countenance and sparkling eyes to those of the austere man beside her, whose sparse locks were already sprinkled with a slight leaven of gray hairs. "Are *all* balls so delightful?"

"To seventeen," he answered, smiling al-

most sadly down upon her. Sad because of his vanished youth?—or because of the wide disparity between seventeen and thirty-seven summers? In truth, I know not.

"And only three hours ago I was miserable!" laughed Nellie. "Already it seems too absurd. Truly, I have never so greatly enjoyed an evening in all my life before!"

"Not in all that long, eventful roll of seventeen years?" Sir Archer queried; "seventeen years which have passed, I suppose, like one sweet, untroubled dream."

"A dream!" echoed Nellie. "Do you call lessons and school-days a dream? It is stern reality, I can assure you, when you have to get up to practice scales at seven o'clock, and when you do not know your French irregular verbs, and Monsieur's knock is distinctly audible. Ah! believe me, I am thankful that I am awake at last, and have done with such 'dreams' forever. Now that I am 'out,' school routine is a thing of the past; though I shall take lessons with masters," she added, ingeniously, despite a suspicion that the admission was not altogether creditable to one whose attractions had sufficed to chain a Baronet to her side for the greater part of one whole evening.

"Lessons with masters, eh?" echoed Sir Archer, with genuine interest. "Well, they will only occupy a portion of your time. The remainder, I suppose, will be devoted to balls and general festivities?"

"Indeed, not!" returned Nellie, in a dolorous tone. "It is very seldom we have any chance of amusement in this stupid Luton. I don't suppose we shall have another ball like this—oh, perhaps never again! It has been delightful!" she concluded with a little sigh of content, mingled strangely with regret.

"Delightful *now*; yet three hours ago you pronounced it a wretched affair!"

"Yes; that was before—before I was introduced to *you*," she answered, innocently. "I do believe I have to thank *you* for having enjoyed myself so much—you have been so kind!"

"Kind!" echoed the man of the world, with a strange, unwonted sensation stirring in his heart, and something rising in his throat, rendering his voice for a moment almost hoarse. "Kind! Have I, then, indeed contributed to your enjoyment, Miss Hebden?"

"Oh, so much!" was the fervent rejoinder of this unconscious little flirt, who looked up with dangerous earnestness into the dark, many-lined visage, in such startling contrast with her own fair, piquant features. "You have danced so often with me, and—and have introduced several of my very nicest partners. Do you know, I have not missed one dance; and just before you spoke to me I was reflecting that it was a dismal fate to be a wall-flower at one's first—*very* first ball!"

For a moment Sir Archer made no reply; he was regarding Nellie with strange earnestness.

"And so you find your life in Luton dull?" he said, at length. "Would you care, then, to see something of the world? London with its ceaseless traffic—Paris with its endless so-called gayety? Would you enjoy a life in which that which you term *pleasure* is, in truth, a part of daily routine? A life in which men, and women too, attend balls and parties from a sense of duty, for in truth each caste has its obligations, however much they chance to vary?"

"Like it?" Miss Hebden echoed, clasping her hands involuntarily, and breathless at the mere mention of an existence which must surely constitute a sort of terrestrial Paradise for those fortunate mortals who were permitted to participate in its delights. "Ah! I cannot tell you how—how it excites me, even to *hear* about such things."

"Even from an old foggy like me?"

"Old foggy, indeed! I think you are *quite* the nicest of all the partners I have had to-night."

"Can it be possible that I have really added to your enjoyment, my dear Miss Hebden? Answer me quite truthfully, I beg."

"Most truthfully, then, I can assure you that *you have*," returned Nellie, with more emphasis than elegance, and sublimely unconscious that any deeper meaning might lurk in Sir Archer's words—any import attach to her own reply.

"Then perhaps you—you might not be altogether displeased to see me some time again, if—if I had your mother's sanction to call upon her shortly."

"Oh, Sir Archer, I should be delighted! Do come, very, very soon! Mamma's sanction, indeed! Why, I shall simply tell her that you are coming, and we shall all be charmed."

Mrs. Hebden's permission to call at the Villas was nevertheless almost obsequiously solicited by the Baronet when, at the close of the dance, he led happy Nellie back to her mother's side. Need I add that it was granted graciously by the deeply-flattered dame, on whom it may here be observed Sir Archer's evident devotion to the unconscious *debutante* had not failed to produce due effect.

As, indeed, likewise on one other. Ellen Humphrey never forgot, and assuredly never forgave, the signal eclipse she had undergone from the moment her fair-haired little friend had appeared upon the scene.

But a few evenings ago Miss Humphrey had enjoyed the satisfaction of observing general interest manifested in her every movement in the ball-room of The Laurels, as soon as it had become patent to all that she was the fair one selected above every other to be the recipient of Sir Archer Trenton's attentions. The sense of triumph and distinction thus conferred was in itself delicious, apart from the contemplation of those future transporting "possibilities," which the Member's evident admiration had conjured up in Ellen's too speculative brain.

When that blissful evening at The Laurels closed, she had been freely bantered and congratulated on the subject of the Member's "marked attentions."

Ere she left the ball-room at The Cedars, comment was circulating as to Sir Archer's "absolute devotion to Mrs. Hebden's little daughter." Well, it was, perhaps, enough to disturb the equanimity even of Nellie's bosom friend!

CHAPTER IV.

"IN THE PLEASANT SUMMER WEATHER."

THE winter for both families at the Villas passed somewhat monotonously away, unmarked by any incident of importance, save indeed the Member's call upon Mrs. Hebden. This was not repeated, however, for very shortly after Sir Archer left unexpectedly for town—a farewell card apprising the inmates of Villa No. 1 of that important departure in due course.

The visit itself was, however, soon forgotten, at any rate by Nellie Hebden; and even before spring had burst into early summer it is doubtful whether she entertained more than a general recollection of the insignificant fact of the Baronet's existence.

By her friend Ellen Humphrey, however, it was, on the contrary, still vividly remembered.

The last days of May were rendered ever memorable this year by the advent of the young lieutenant before alluded to at Villa No. 2. For Laurence Humphrey obtained leave from his colonel, and came home triumphant just in time to celebrate his majority upon the glorious 1st of June.

Ah, that birthday! Would Nellie Hebden ever forget all that date must henceforth commemorate in the annals of her life?

No; for should she live till her own hair is streaked with silver—her features wrinkled, care-worn, old, her heart methinks would still beat thick and fast as she recalled the delicious thrill of wonder and amaze, mingling with something, oh! how far more sweet and indescribable than either, which she experienced when again beholding the tall, dark-browed young officer, from whom she had parted five long years before.

Nellie had been a gay, romping girl at that

time, and had taken leave of the careless stripling with absolute indifference, as she now perhaps too forcibly remembered; marveling, as she held out her little hand, and gazed up into his dark, expressive eyes, how she could by any possibility have forgotten Laurence all this long time.

Although some few weeks only had elapsed since then, Nellie, in these days every inch a woman, found herself wondering what existence had been like before—well, before the first of June. Surely tedious, monotonous, uneventful; but already the tender brightness, the all-absorbing interest of the life just unfolding, promised more than amply to atone for those bygone wasted years, before—before Laurence Humphrey had returned to play a leading part on the little stage of the narrow Luton world.

To-day, Nellie sat before her easel, but the pencil was idle in her hand; a smile hovered about her sweet, fresh lips, for she was living over again in thought the delights of yesterday. A habit, this, to which she had become much addicted in these days; for surely as the curtain of each evening fell upon the blissful events of departed day, it seemed a thousand pities to say good-by to much that might be well-nigh as fully enjoyed in fancy over again.

"Nell, are you within?"

This question, in ringing, manly tones, startled Nellie from her trance.

"I am here, Laurence," she cried, springing forward to the open window, and waving a glad welcome to the young fellow leaning over the garden gate. He bounded up the pathway then, and in another moment stood by Nellie's side—she within, he outside the low French window opening upon the terrace.

"Nellie, we've got the boat ready for this afternoon, and mean to start directly after luncheon," the Lieutenant began explaining eagerly; "and Ellen has asked Derwent to go with us, so I shall be left entirely to your tender mercies, I suppose? Hard lines for me!"

This, with a rueful expression of countenance, which made Nell laugh heartily, albeit she would fain have appeared to accept the statement in good faith.

In very few minutes he had told her all about it. How they were to run down the river as far as Snarke's Bay, as a little indenture along the bank was termed; there land and enjoy a ramble among the fragrant hedge-rows, until the tide should serve for their return.

"And we must not start late on any account," Laurence added, "or it will be all up. We can't pull against stream with the river in its present state. So just make your dressing operations 'sharp,' even at the risk of appearing one degree less beautiful than usual. And now I'm off. Until three o'clock, ta! ta!"

And, snatching a cluster of early June roses, which were fastened in Nellie's dress, Laurence bounded off again, as unceremoniously as he had come.

Miss Hebden did *not* waste over the mysteries of her toilet many of those valuable moments which might be turned to precious account in the society of—well, of her friends—basking in the sweet, warm sunshine, upon the placid bosom of the river.

So, as three o'clock struck, Laurence pushed off, and the May Queen, with her smiling freight, glided gracefully from the bank.

Three of the little crew were radiant as sunshine, youth and idleness can render mortals. Laurence alone wore a preoccupied gloomy air. For this, if the truth had been known, Ellen Humphrey was answerable—a brief verbal passage of arms having ensued between brother and sister on Laurence's return from the Hebden's.

Ellen had opened fire by suggesting that Laurence should "invite another man or another girl, if he preferred it"—to join their water party that afternoon. This proposal was received with infinite scorn by him whose welfare at that moment was uppermost in his sister's mind.

"Why on earth should we be bothered with

any one else?" queried the young fellow, with ingenuous earnestness. "You will have Derwent—ergo, neither eyes nor ears for any other human creature. And I—well, Nellie and I must take refuge in one another's society. Hard lines for Nellie, no doubt; yet what in the world would become of the unfortunate odd man out, or woman either, for that matter, if this proposed addition to the party should happen to be of the feminine gender?"

"That is just it!" retorted Ellen, angrily; for, in truth, inward annoyance made her less careful than usual to conceal her real thoughts. "Laurence, I am not blind to what is going on between you and Nellie, and I think it perfectly disgraceful!"

"Ellen, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Ah, *you* know well enough, and I only *too* well! You are falling in love with Nellie, and she, of course, with you. And it is preposterous! You have not a farthing in the world; and when you are old enough, ten years hence, to indulge in the luxury of matrimony, why, even then you must perforce marry money."

This was plain speaking; and, despite the furious retort it elicited, it had, at least, the effect of bringing the Lieutenant to a mental "full stop," and caused him to indulge in a brief survey of facts, of which hitherto he had carefully avoided any distinct summary.

Anyhow, he argued, he was justified in resenting Ellen's interference. Her own intimacy with Charlie Derwent was disapproved of by both parents. Nevertheless, Ellen turned a deaf ear to all remonstrance on this count; although, as we have seen, more than anxious to warn her brother of breakers ahead, and the dangerous rapids of youthful indiscretion.

Once the little boat was fairly afloat, however, and Derwent was fully absorbing Miss Humphrey's attention, the Lieutenant's transient disquietude evaporated, and he gave himself up with perfect equanimity to the exquisite enjoyment of the hour.

After all, the sweet June air and sunshine, the soothing motion of the waters, the presence of the fairest creature on earth—for so Nellie seemed to him—might well exorcise the demon of perplexity from the breast of even an older and wiser man than Laurence Humphrey.

Snarke's Bay was duly reached; the May Queen was moored, and the happy quartette disposed themselves in attitudes perhaps of more ease than elegance upon the fragrant, grassy bank, warm with the bright June sunshine.

The scene was exquisitely tranquil, and all nature had that tender beauty which is peculiarly her own when spring, passing imperceptibly away, gives place to early summer.

The trees, the hedges, even the dancing waters and the cloudless sky, seemed invested with a delicate purity of color—an indescribable charm which becomes inevitably lost in the mature luxuriance of a more advanced season.

Midsummer, it is true, has a glory all its own; but for many of us there are no days in the calendar possessed of half the tender charm of those bright days of early June.

A hamper of light refreshments having been duly discussed, our happy party arose; and by general consent, a ramble among the fragrant hedgerows was decided upon.

Sisterly solicitude was forgotten, even feminine malice for awhile evaporated, as Ellen, looking up at Derwent, allowed him to pass his arm within her own, and lead her off toward a woody glade.

After all, Laurence was old enough to be prudent on his own account; and, as for that flirting minx, Nellie—well, she must look after herself. Neither of them had been consigned to Ellen's care; so it was hardly to be expected that she should sacrifice the pleasant moments that might be spent alone with Derwent in playing propriety for the sake of those who were hardly likely to manifest a becoming sense of gratitude.

So she wandered off with Derwent, leaving Laurence on his knees repacking the little ham-

per; while Nellie, bending over him, superintended the proceedings.

The Lieutenant raised his head; and for a moment, hesitated, as he looked after his sister's retreating form.

"They've left us to our fate, Nell," he muttered, half aloud.

"Oh, I'll take good care of you!" laughingly rejoined the happy, unconscious little maid.

At that very moment, it so chanced that Derwent, looking back, waved his hat, crying gayly, "Good-by till six o'clock!"

"All right!" hastily responded the Lieutenant, springing to his feet just as his friend and sister disappeared among the trees.

"Well, Nellie, dear," he began; but then paused suddenly, and looked aside.

Strangely enough, at that very moment the girl's gaze faltered likewise.

For the first time, these two were uncomfortably conscious that they were left to the uninterrupted enjoyment of each other's society.

Neither spoke.

Strange that both, usually so voluble, on this occasion found never a word to say.

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

"LAURENCE, it is getting late. Come, sir, we must go," quoth Nellie, as the long shadows upon the grass startled her into recollection of time, circumstance, and place.

They were sitting side by side upon a stile now, and I am not sure that the young man's strong arm was not wound about the girl's slender waist; at any rate, he held her right hand tightly locked in his, and Nellie was all content.

For after that momentary constraint, which I duly chronicled in its proper place, I am bound to admit that both youth and maiden simultaneously decided (each in their inmost thoughts) that it would be only wise to make the best of the unfortunate position in which circumstances had placed them.

Arriving at so sage a conclusion, the rest was easy enough; and, once having resigned themselves to the infliction of each other's society, behold them, when the sun sunk low behind the trees, as—well, as happy as is compatible with a temporary resting-place on the topmost rail of a rustic stile.

"Nellie, I positively decline to stir," retorted the young man, bending forward to look more closely at her. "One does not so often come across a happy hour that one can afford to curtail it by a single moment, when that confounded old niggard, Fate, grants us a respite from the worries of life."

Nellie laughed—to hide a momentary embarrassment, perhaps. Somehow—somehow she did not quite know what to say when Laurence spoke with that strange new expression in his gaze and in his voice.

It made her heart beat, and her pulses throb; it made her tremble, and feel—well, just a little afraid. So what resource had she, save to essay a feeble little laugh? It fell flat and mirthless, however, and—indeed died away with a dangerous, unsteady sound.

"Laurence, don't talk nonsense! What should you know, indeed, of the 'worries of life,' as you term them—you, but a boy, to whom mere existence is enjoyment?"

"A boy, Nellie?" he echoed, quickly. "That is where you all make a great mistake. You would not call me 'boy,' dear, if you could but see the secret hidden in my heart of hearts!"

"Secret! What can you mean, Laurence?"

"Nellie, can you not guess?"

She shook her head. Just then the words failed to rise glibly to her lips.

"Must I tell you, then?" he whispered, bending his dark head lower—"must I tell you, Nellie, dear one? Why do you turn aside? Nellie, look into my eyes. Perhaps you may read my secret there."

Yet Nellie only turned her curls more persistently toward the speaker. Perhaps be-

cause she, too, had a secret, and one that she would fain conceal.

"Let us go!" she cried suddenly, and would have dropped to her feet; but his strong arm detained her.

Spite of her struggles, he held her fast.

"You shall not go," he said, "until you have guessed that which I no longer care to hide."

"Oh, Laurence, we must not stay longer! We shall be late! I will not hear a word!"

"If you will not hear, then you must be made to suffer. Nellie, translate *this*!"

And, darting forward suddenly, he kissed her.

"Laurence, how—how dare you, sir?"

"He dares all who loves as I do! Nellie, you are the whole wide world to me! You would not call me 'boy,' dear, if you could but form the faintest notion of the strong man's love in my heart now, darling, darling Nell!"

"Oh, Laurence!" was all she faltered.

Just then, it apparently sufficed.

I fancy the discriminating reader, after this, will scarcely be surprised to learn that at least another quarter of an hour elapsed before this foolish, happy pair started to their feet, and, hand in hand, set out with rapid strides to rejoin the others; for, in truth, both were now agreed that "it *must* be growing late." Lovers, unfortunately, as is proverbial, having but a limited appreciation of the flight of time.

Moreover, in this instance they were not altogether culpable—so we feel compelled to admit the plea of "extenuating circumstances;" for Laurence, equipped for boating, had wisely (or unwisely, as it chanced) left his hunter safe on his dressing-table at home.

Nellie, in truth, wore a jeweled plaything, which she grandly styled "her watch;" but it is needless to observe that it shared the general fate of ladies' time-keepers, and for many an hour had stood perversely still.

Drawing within view of their extemporized landing-stage, both young hearts bounded with a sense of deep relief. Neither Derwent nor Ellen was in sight; hence the hour, after all, was not so late as they had tremblingly concluded.

"Good heavens!"

"Laurence!"

Such were the ejaculations which escaped simultaneously, for on reaching a turn in the bank both Nellie and Laurence recognized at the same moment that the boat, as well as friend and sister, had undoubtedly disappeared.

For a moment they stood spell-bound—then rushed forward breathlessly. But, alas! only to make assurance doubly sure.

Derwent and Ellen had, in truth, unmoored the May Queen, and were now drifting quickly with the rushing tide in the direction of The Villas.

"Charlie shall render an account for this!" Laurence muttered, through closed teeth.

"How cruel—cruel of Ellen!" gasped poor Nell.

But both did the absent grievous wrong. Far from having intentionally "played them a trick," as the deserted ones forthwith concluded, Derwent and Miss Humphrey had indeed waited, in a desperate state of anxiety, a full hour longer than had been prearranged, and had not finally embarked until the very latest moment compatible with tidal considerations. Then nothing remained but to leave the defaulters to their fate; for, as Ellen sensibly decided, "of two evils, it is always well to choose the lesser."

In the present instance, much as the delayed return was to be regretted for Nellie's sake, still it was less disastrous for *her* to be belated in the safe keeping of the young Lieutenant, the friend of her earliest days, than had a like mishap overtaken Ellen in the society of Charlie Derwent, an acquaintance scarcely tolerated by her parents.

Besides, it was just possible Laurence had devised some other method of reaching home—by road or railway, possibly.

At any rate, one thing was evident—Miss Humphrey had been bound to consider the exigencies of her own particular case; and so, with many misgivings, Charlie Derwent had ultimately pushed off in obedience to her wish, leaving the absent couple to make the best of fate.

But ignorant of all such redeeming clauses, Laurence and Nellie stared blankly at each other, with something very like despair in their hearts, and the strongest possible sense of injury against those truants who were far less blamable than the lovers themselves.

Anon they heard the cheery sound of a laborer's whistle, as he tramped homeward through the wood close by.

"Hi!—you there!" Laurence shouted; and in due course the man responded to the summons. "What may the hour be?" the young man asked, with an anxiety he could no longer conceal.

"Nigh eight o' the clock, zur," responded the sturdy son of toil, with alacrity, evidently laboring under an erroneous impression that the intelligence conveyed was calculated to raise drooping spirits.

"The deuce it is! And—and do you happen to know whether a boat may be obtained about here?"

The man took off his tattered cap, and proceeded to scratch his woolly head with a sense of infinite enjoyment.

"Ay, zur; I maun happen to know!"

"Well?" questioned Laurence eagerly.

"There be naw fishing-smacks i' these parts, zur! Ours be a 'op picking country!"

"Not a boat of any kind?—a punt—a coble?"

The Lieutenant's voice now had a ring of deep disquiet, which startled even Nellie—less conscious than the young man of the serious nature, so far as she was personally concerned, of this unfortunate misadventure.

"Naw, zur; don't I tell 'ee? There's naw so much as a tub to be gotten in these 'ere parts. And even if ye'd got an afloat, it 'ud need be a man-o'-war to stand ag'in' this 'ere tide!"

This circumstance had escaped Laurence.

He bit his lips in desperate perplexity.

Given a boat, even, with the tide in its present condition he could not, unaided, have reached The Villas until far into the night.

"Can I get any sort of conveyance about here?" he asked, after a moment's pause, as the man shouldered his pickaxe, and prepared to trudge forward.

"Yer might jist chance to git a waggin up at t' village—and yer jist *mightn't*!" was the cautious rejoinder.

"And how far is the village? What village is it?"

"It maun be a matter o' two mile, more nor less, to our village Hannalby, as most call it; and if ye canna getten waggin there, why, you maun chance to catchen train!"

A cry of relief burst from the Lieutenant's lips.

"The train! To be sure! If we are near to Annalby, of course we can reach the railway. Forward, Nellie—forward!"

And tossing a bright shilling to the bewildered laborer, Laurence drew poor, trembling Nellie's arm through his own, and hurried onward, without another second's delay, in the direction indicated by a tall church spire.

Well, in due course they reached the village station, thence Luton, whence a cab bore them safely to The Villas.

Nellie arrived in a state of complete exhaustion, which disarmed parental ire. Indeed, the anxiety both households had endured during the last few hours of suspense unfitted the authorities for any manifestation of severity in any degree corresponding with the enormity of the offense of which these culprits were undoubtedly found guilty.

I think the reprimands administered both to Laurence and Miss Hebden would have been of an altogether different character had the worthy papa of either delinquent been conscious of a brief dialogue which ensued almost within reach of parental ears—even as the cab stopped before the gates of The Villas.

"Nell, darling!" whispered Laurence to the girl, whose weary head rested tranquilly upon the arm passed, with infinite solicitude for her comfort (!), beneath her tangled curls, "this—this adventure seems to have made you doubly dear! Remember always you are *mine*—my very, very own!—even though I may not claim you to-day, to-morrow, nor for weeks nor months! Nell, say that you give yourself to me?"

"Oh, Laurence!" was all she answered.

Then the young man bent his head, and kissed her softly.

"As sign and seal!" he whispered.

But Nell said never a word.

Only later, when her mother, assisting her to disrobe, said, tenderly, "You must have had a terribly trying day, my dear!" Nellie gave a little sigh, demurely answering, in all good faith, "Not so *very* dreadful, after all, mamma!"

CHAPTER VI.

UNEXPECTED PROMOTION.

It happened that the very next morning, when Ellen, as in duty bound, went next door to the Hebden to inquire as to the welfare of her friend after the exploit of the previous day, a circumstance occurred, trifling, perhaps, in itself, yet on which may be said to have hinged the destinies of several human lives.

"The postman!" said Ellen, listlessly, as, while listening to Nellie's simple account of last evening's perplexities, her looks strayed out toward the bank. "It must be a letter from the town or neighborhood at this time of day."

Ellen proved correct in her surmise. Moreover, the large square envelope, with an imposing coat of arms upon its scarlet seal, was addressed to Mrs. Hebden, and came from no less a personage than Sir Archer Trenton, M.P.

Sir Archer Trenton briefly wrote that he found himself again at the Manor, where his sister (the Countess of St. John) was enacting hostess to a party of his friends. A pleasant, informal expedition to some neighboring ruins had been organized for the Wednesday following. Might he hope that Mrs. Hebden and her daughter would waive all ceremonious considerations, and join the party? He anxiously awaited her reply; and if this were of a favorable nature, he would send a brougham in on Wednesday morning to convey the ladies to the Manor in time to start with the remainder of the "foraging force."

The astonishment with which Nellie listened while her mother read this note aloud was trifling compared to the absolute emotion by which Ellen sat inwardly convulsed, a silent spectator of the scene.

A cold, swift "something," altogether indefinable, stole to her heart.

Was it possible that she—*she*—must endure to be thus completely ignored, while on that "baby of a girl" (as mentally she designated Nellie) showered laurels of distinction?

An invitation to the Manor was an honor Ellen never remembered to have fallen to the share of any of their circle; and that the Hebden should be thus signalized was—yes, was indeed proof positive that Sir Archer Trenton had not forgotten the impression effected upon his susceptible fancy by the fair-haired little *debutante* at The Cedars at the close of the previous year.

While Ellen—proud, beautiful Ellen Humphrey, whose supremacy had never been disputed, whose right to hold her queenly head higher than any other, had been tacitly admitted in her own world because of her superior attractions over the majority of girls, the undoubted fascination she exercised over almost every specimen of mankind with which she had chanced to come in contact within the prescribed limits of the narrow Luton world—that she should be eclipsed, forgotten, while her insignificant friend was selected to play the part Ellen considered herself specially adapted to enact, was, in truth, maddening, unbearable to

this girl's arrogant and but too resentful nature.

Never, through all her life to come, did Ellen forget the swift, momentary agony she endured as the "situation" forced itself upon her mind in its every bearing. Yet, when Nellie turned toward her with a radiant, beaming countenance, and hands clasped in natural girlish exultation, Ellen must perforce essay a sickly smile, and murmur, "How delightful!"

Young Humphrey, however, found the intelligence by no means "delightful" when it was duly conveyed to him later by his sister, with a studied calm of voice and demeanor strangely at variance with the passion rioting in her heart.

"Ah! of course you never heard of the affair at The Cedars, the night Nellie made her first appearance. It was long before your return home."

"What do you mean?" the young man questioned, abruptly, while his pulses quickened.

"Oh, I will say no more—you might not be interested!" his sister retorted, with exasperating indifference, bending over some flowers she was arranging in a vase.

"Nell, for Heaven's sake, tell me! I don't know what you mean?"

"Nell, forsooth!"—and Miss Humphrey threw back her beautiful head, and indulged in a low, carefully-modulated laugh, for, in truth, even in the family circle she was seldom unmindful of "effects,"—"you must be very anxious to gain your point, when you condescend to use to me the appellation usually reserved for the divinity next door! I almost forget that I have as good a right to the name of 'Nell,' or 'Nellie,' as Miss Hebden herself! Well, Laurence, you shall hear."

And hear he did, a highly-colored and distorted narrative of facts, which were simple enough had they been veraciously recounted; for have not most of us heard of some instance in which a man of mature age and elevated position has, like Sir Archer, suddenly felt the influence of bright eyes, a saucy smile, and the irresistible charm of a pleasant, unsophisticated nature, in the opening blush of womanhood?

The story had a different tone, however, couched in Miss Humphrey's well-turned phrases of virtuous indignation. According to her statement, Nellie had gone to The Cedars determined to effect a conquest; had made what her friend stigmatized as "a dead set" at the unconscious Baronet; and—"mark my words," she concluded, with vicious emphasis, "that girl—child, indeed, I might almost say—would barter her youth and beauty to-morrow for Sir Archer's broad lands and title! Though, after all, it would be, in truth, less culpable in her than might appear to on-lookers, for Nellie's nature is such that I doubt whether she be capable of experiencing that terrible feeling of disgust which possesses most women when any man, save the right, ventures to make love to them! Nellie would suffer no torture in becoming the wife of poor old Sir Archer. To her, caressing tenderness is acceptable, I verily believe, from each and every quarter!"

"Ellen, how dare you? How dare you speak thus of any girl—of Nellie Hebden, above all others?"

"Simply," retorted Ellen, with a scornful laugh of infinite amusement, "because I am always bold enough to speak the truth; and, considering that Nellie and I have hardly passed a single day apart since she left her cradle, if I am not in a position to form a just estimate of her true nature, I should very much like to know who is. Not you, my valiant brother, most assuredly; for I regret that it is plainly evident you regard Sir Archer's loved one through the medium of rose-tinted glasses. We all know, moreover, that a certain mischievous imp is blind."

With something very like a curse, the young man turned and left her.

His first impulse was to rush impetuously next door, candidly inform Nellie that the

notion of this visit to the Manor was intolerable to him, and beg her, at any cost, to resign the prospect of a day's enjoyment in order to gratify his whim.

But after an hour's rapid walk along the fragrant river-bank, Laurence had arrived at a more comprehensive view of the situation.

By what rhyme or reason was he entitled to prefer such a request as the one he had contemplated? Even if Nellie were prepared to yield the point, what construction would her parents put upon so singular a determination on the part of pleasure-loving Nell?

Moreover, albeit he loved the girl with as strong and true a love, he told himself, as any of which the human heart is capable, still, to a man of the world like Mr. Hebden, Laurence was conscious he must appear a mere hare-brained youth—a penniless Lieutenant, without ultimate prospects of any sort.

How dare he assert pretensions to the hand of any girl? And, without this end avowedly in view, what claim had he to influence Nellie's decision in a matter like the present?

True, he loved her; and knew that her love was all his own.

Yet he dared not ask her boldly of her parents as his wife, for the result of any such proceeding, Laurence was fully conscious, would be his immediate separation from the girl, to whose father he could not appear in any light save that of a "detrimental."

Yet surely it is hard that a youth may not woo a maiden unless a satisfactory account of £. s. d. can be rendered to papa.

Do not the lambkins frisk together in the sunshine?—the young foals prance and curvet? Each little bird carols a love-ditty to the feathered flutterer on the nearest bough in the fragrant days of summer!

To lads and lasses alone it is forbidden to follow the dictates of their own will. They must not love, and, loving, part, to meet and love again.

Unless, indeed, Corydon's check-book is open to the inspection of Phyllis's papa.

Ah! ours is, indeed, a cold, prosaic, nineteenth-century world!

Yet even Phyllis and Corydon need shoes and bread and butter in the present lamentably-constituted state of society; so that, after all, it is doubtful whether their ultimate fate would not prove even more sad than at present, save for the restrictions and precautionary vigilance of prudent mammas and papas.

CHAPTER VII.

A LUCKY DISASTER.

LIKE the old dame in the nursery story, Nellie Hebden, when the eventful Wednesday ultimately arrived, felt very much disposed to question, "Can this, indeed, be me?"

And, in truth, she might well be incredulous of her own identity when, toward one o'clock on a brilliant midsummer-day, she found herself on the box-seat of Sir Archer Trenton's drag, one of the select few who were privileged to sit behind those spanking grays which never turned "the Corner" in the season without eliciting a burst of admiration from all enthusiastic admirers of horseflesh.

The remainder of the party followed in conveyances of divers kinds, the dog-cart bringing up the rear, with a goodly array of hampers.

Nellie found herself transported to a new world—a world of which hitherto she had only vaguely dreamed; and, indeed, trembled when the eventful morning dawned at the contemplation of the ordeal she was destined to undergo.

Mrs. Hebden, on the contrary, was complacent and elated, conscious that at the Manor, or go wherever else she might, she would meet no more perfect lady than herself—no woman better dressed.

Moreover, which titled dame among the party collected at Sir Archer's would boast a daughter half so charming and irresistible (the mother could not help reflecting) as that dainty damsel who presented herself for family

approbation just as the neat brougham from the Manor drew up at the villa gates.

"Oh, mamma! I am so nervous! I do so wish I were as old as you, then—"

"Why, then, my dear, the probabilities are we should neither of us have been honored by this invitation. But indeed, Nellie, I feel annoyed with you. Remember always that a lady—a genuine lady, my dear—is equally at home with prince or peasant. Were you a queen, my child, after all you could but be a lady. As such, you need feel yourself in no wise inferior to any whom you may meet at the Manor House to-day. Moreover, Sir Archer would hardly have invited us did he consider you in any degree the inferior of his other guests.

Despite which encouraging assurances, when the brougham stopped at the entrance of the Manor House private grounds, and Sir Archer himself hurried forward, to assist the ladies to alight, Nellie, as she put her little hand in his, looked up, pale and anxious, murmuring, half unconsciously, "Oh, Sir Archer! do not leave us! I—I think I am afraid!"

"Afraid, Miss Hebden?—afraid of what? Ah, that you will make the other ladies jealous, by putting them all in the shade!"

As he spoke, he placed his hand almost caressingly upon her arm and Nellie, smiling, blushing, radiant, now reflected that if all "aristocrats" were like Sir Archer, there was nothing to be alarmed at, after all.

Mrs. Hebden was at her ease in a moment with Lady St. John and the other guests; and it was perhaps in consequence of the timidity Nellie had so ingenuously confessed, that the good-natured Baronet hovered ever in her vicinity.

And by the time he had himself shown her the aviary, the conservatory, the rosary, and the archery lawns, Nellie had quite forgotten that she was in strange waters, and floated merrily with the stream. No one regarding her could wonder at the unmistakable preference Sir Archer evinced for the society of this piquant little maid, who had never perhaps appeared to greater advantage than as she stood, surrounded by those more artificial beauties gathered at the Manor House to-day.

Her timidity once conquered, she became positively hilarious in her innocent glee. Indeed, at first, more than one stately demoiselle turned to regard "that Miss Hebden" with a well-bred stare of wonderment, when the ripple of the girl's gay laughter floated across the lawn, or childish exclamations of delight and surprise escaped her rosy lips each time that her attention was attracted by any special feature in the surroundings previously unnoticed.

Nevertheless, the master of those lordly grounds beheld a fresh charm in the landscape, a new beauty in the scene, each time his glance fell upon that slender figure in her simple morning toilet of spotless white and palest blue. And once, as she ran, with the unstudied grace of girhood, the fleet step of the fawn, across the terrace, the Baronet looked after her with something deeper than admiration in his kindly gaze.

Nevertheless, those ladies, whose every step was regulated by line and rule, smiled somewhat contemptuously; and even Mrs. Hebden murmured that "she wished Nellie would not make herself quite so much at home!"

All unconscious of the general criticism, however, Miss Nell chattered gayly to the Baronet as she sat now behind the grays, pointing with her dainty finger to any object in the landscape which demanded special explanation. She learned the names of all four horses, and declared so vehemently that she had taken an unaccountable dislike to the off-side leader, that Sir Archer mentally determined he would replace it by another.

"After all," it now occurred to him, "it was not so very admirable a match!"

Then came the luncheon, when Nellie, flushed with the excitement and the sun's warm glow, threw off her hat, and sitting next the Baronet, twined a wreath of ivy in mere wantonness,

while he "did the honors" to the hungry guests. After that he took the simple chaplet from her hand, and placed it almost reverently upon her golden curls, whispering, half involuntarily, "Thus, thus I crown the queen!—queen among women, little Nell—queen of my heart, forever!"

Nellie laughed, serenely unconscious of any deeper meaning in those words, and wore her garland on her sun-wreathed brow with childish simplicity and grace. The other ladies withdrew one glove, and just raised their vails above the upper lip, in order to admit of their sipping the champagne cup without detriment to their lace; no wonder they glanced at Nellie's ruffled feathers with positive dismay.

But the climax was reached when Miss Hebden discovered the wishing-bone upon her plate, and clapping her hands, cried aloud in her glee, that "Sir Archer must break it, and grant whatever she wished; for, of course, I must win, you know!"

The sequel proved otherwise, however; and when the Baronet held up his prize, laughing at the girl's disappointment, she cried out, in tones of real distress, "Oh, that's no fun; you can't wish for anything that I can grant! Oh, let us try again!"

But Sir Archer gravely placed the trophy in his letter-case, whispering that "Fair play was a jewel;" and, later, he would put Nellie's generosity to the test.

After the refectory, as a matter of course, the party broke up into twos and threes, and wandered about whither they pleased. Then who so well qualified as the Baronet to show Nellie every point of interest about the old monastic domain? So, naturally, he strode off along with the light-hearted girl.

At last, when every wall had been examined, every winding-path explored, he took her to the Tarn—a sparkling pool of placid waters, so limpid, that on looking down, Nellie beheld her own fair features faithfully reflected.

"Oh, Sir Archer, mamma must see the Tarn and hear the echo. Listen! Nel-lie!—Nel-lie!" And as she raised her fresh young voice again and yet again, its notes, clear as a bell, resounded among the hills.

"Oh, let me fetch mamma!" And Nellie would have bounded off, but Sir Archer said she must rest awhile upon a mossy bank, and that he meanwhile would act as envoy to Mrs. Hebden.

He had scarcely retreated twelve paces from her side, ere Nellie, climbing to her perch, placed her foot unwittingly upon a dark loose stone, and losing her balance, with a sharp cry, slipped backward into the pool.

Sir Archer was beside her in a moment, but already she had gained her feet, and scrambled, laughing, to dry land again. Her pretty dress was drenched, however; her yellow curls were dripping; and she stood like some Nereid of old, save for her modern garb; while Sir Archer, infinitely distressed, himself wrung the water from her draperies, and then, with a touch reverent and slightly tremulous, from out the tangled masses, of her hair.

"And see my shoes! How shall I walk? And, oh!"—with sudden gravity—"my dress is spoiled! Mamma will be so angry!"

"Angry?—no one must be angry. The fault was mine—mine alone!"

"Yours! Oh, Sir Archer, what a dreadful fib!" And Nellie's laughter pealed forth afresh; her spirits rose again.

Now it was that the Baronet proved himself a man of infinite resources. A dog-whistle, attached to his watch guard, in a few minutes brought one of the grooms to the Tarn, whence he was dispatched, with strictest injunctions to let none suspect the nature of his errand, to the hostelry close by where the horses had been put up.

Ten minutes later, the dog-cart stood among the trees, ready for action; and Nellie, divested of her dripping over-skirt, and carefully wrapped in a long ulster of Sir Archer's—placed in the trap for use during the return drive in the cool night air—clambered up among the cush-

ions beside the Baronet. The groom sprang up behind as Sir Archer turned the horses' heads in the direction of the Manor House, which, indeed, was reached just as Mrs. Hebden began to wonder "what on earth could have become of Nell?" She smiled indulgently, however, as Lady St. John answered her, with an expressive glance, that "her charming little daughter was quite safe, for the Baronet had taken her in charge."

Nellie, upon her arrival, had been handed over, with many instructions, to the kind old housekeeper; and not until she reappeared—still in Mrs. Barton's charge, and arrayed in dressing-gown and slippers of Lady St. John, all rosy from the warm bath in which Sir Arthur had insisted she should be placed, to counteract the possible effects of any chill she might have sustained—did her anxious host bethink himself of the necessity of returning, to conduct home the remainder of his guests.

There was a bright fire burning in his own little study when Mrs. Barton ushered Nellie in, and a delicious aroma of coffee filled the air; for on a glittering silver tray, in which Nellie could see herself reflected, the daintiest of meals had been prepared for her especial delectation.

Sir Archer wheeled forward his own great leathern elbow-chair, ensconced in the furthest corner of which Nellie looked like an elfin creature, with her burning cheeks, disheveled curls, and strange, incongruous array.

"Do you know, Sir Archer," she cried, excitedly, "I do believe I have enjoyed the whole disaster. It has been such fun, has it not, after all?"

The Baronet did not answer, perhaps because he was stooping at that moment to arrange a footstool for Nellie's use; which, by the way, was a somewhat superfluous exertion on his part, as even the tips of Miss Hebden's toes were suspended far above the floor.

Then, just as he was wishing her "good-by" for the third time, and really preparing to depart, Nellie suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, the wishing-bone, Sir Archer! You have never told me what you wish?"

Then he returned, and stood beside her chair, looking down upon her gravely, wistfully—somewhat sadly withal, it occurred to the girl, as she raised her dancing eyes fearlessly to his.

"I wonder, little maiden, if you would grant me the boon I do indeed desire above all things else on earth?"

"Try me, Sir Archer—only try me! I—I think I would do anything in the wide world to please you."

"Would you, indeed, little Nellie? Even if I put you to a very hard test?"

"Ah! but you could not, because—because, of course, there is nothing I can do for you! And you have been so kind to me, Sir Archer; you have provided me with more enjoyment than I had ever known in all my life before!"

"Good-by, little Nellie!" was all he said; and, for a moment, he held her hand, and would have turned away.

"But you have not told me yet, Sir Archer. Oh, you must before you go!"

Nellie stretched forth her other small white hand; and, in her eagerness to detain him, clasped the Baronet's long fingers between both her own soft palms. Thus she held, gazing frankly and fearlessly at him.

And Sir Archer Trenton, looking down upon her, shivered slightly, and disengaged his hand.

"Not to-night, child. Not here; it cannot—must not be! Some other time—elsewhere—I will remind you of the wishing-bone. Good-by!"

And thus he left her, wondering why he had spoken in so grave a tone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TROUBLES OF YOUTH.

THE morning following these events, Ellen Humphrey, of course, appeared at the Hebden's, in order to receive a full, true, and particular account of what had transpired at the

Manor House the previous day. She happened, therefore, to be present when a cockaded footman, wearing the Member's livery, rode up to the Villa gates, bearing a small hamper of fruit and flowers for Miss Hebden, with his master's compliments, and profuse inquiries after her health.

To each member of the two households, saving the still unconscious Nellie, it was now evident that the Baronet had but one definite object in view.

And, indeed, on this score they were left but very little longer in doubt; for, on the third morning succeeding the events narrated in the last chapter, a letter, in the now familiar hand of Sir Archer Trenton, arrived at the Villa as the little household sat at breakfast. The missive, moreover, with cumbrous seal, was on this occasion addressed to no less a personage than "Roger Hebden, Esq."

"From Sir Archer, I declare!" cried Nellie, gleefully. "Oh, papa, let me see! Another invitation, I am sure."

Papa, however, did not let "me" see; but, having read the Baronet's communication three times over, with a slight flush upon his brow, folded it carefully, and replaced it in its envelope, while he took shelter from cross-examination behind the broad sheet of the *Times*.

"Oh, papa, am I not to see? Quite a long letter, too! What *can* Sir Archer have to write about to *you*?"

"Business, my dear—business!" was the curt rejoinder.

But papa seemed restless, and it was evidently a relief when he had finished a second cup, and could retire to his private den without exciting undue comment.

Thither Mrs. Hebden hastened to follow him, however, in accordance with a brief telegraphic signal which had escaped Nellie's observation, her attention just then having been fully occupied by an egg.

Surely it would be superfluous to add that it was a formal proposal for Miss Hebden's hand, which the delighted father now placed before his wife.

The Baronet's note, moreover, concluded with an urgent petition that he might be allowed to plead his suit personally with the girl, from whom he begged all formal intimation of his intention might be studiously withheld.

By return of post Sir Archer Trenton received a reply from Mr. Hebden, couched in terms which the eager Baronet deemed eminently satisfactory.

Meanwhile, the domestic atmosphere next door was in an unpleasantly disturbed condition.

Ellen had not failed to communicate to her brother every particular connected with the arrival of the "Baronet's envoy," as she persisted in terming the footman, from the Manor House.

Laurence hearkened silently for a time; but unable, at length, to bear the scrutiny of his sister's gaze, listen to her sneering tone, her bitter, sarcastic innuendoes, he rose, and would have left the room.

"Are you about to seek the solitude of your chamber, dear boy?" Ellen questioned, mockingly, "that you may weep undisturbed over your sentimental grievances? Confess, now, you *did* flatter yourself that Nellie regarded you with peculiar interest; did imagine that it was on you only she shed the sunshine of her smile, the magic of her glance! You would not believe, when my superior judgment whispered, that her smiles were thus far given to all mankind! In *her* mind the absent have no part; whoever hovers nearest has the first place in her heart. Lieutenant Laurence, were I a man, I would scorn to be fooled by a child like that!"

"Ellen Humphrey," he retorted, in a low, savage tone, which to his sister's ear sounded strange and unfamiliar—"were you a man, I would have crammed your cowardly sentences down your throat before they had well left

your lips! As it is, I treat your malicious insinuations with the contempt they merit. It is patent that you are jealous—jealous, with all the mean, pitiful spite of a vain, empty-headed woman, of—of Nellie, whom you profess to call your friend! Nellie, who is as much fairer than yourself as she is likewise worthier! You are conscious that all men, seeing her, must love her! Admiration of a certain sort may be *your* meed, but Nellie Hebden is no sooner seen than *loved*!"

The impetuosity of youth and passion had long since rendered Laurence blind to all considerations of prudence; otherwise, for the sake of the girl he loved, he would not thus have provoked to fury one whom he well knew likely to prove a dangerous adversary.

Ellen heard him patiently to the end, gazing at him with a strange metallic glitter in her black eyes, and something feline in her general attitude and expression.

When, at length, he paused, she threw back her head, and burst into one of those peals of studied laughter which grated so painfully on her brother's ear.

"Jealous—jealous of Nellie Hebden!" she hissed between her closed teeth; for, although she struggled to speak lightly, she was pale with passion, and found actual difficulty in emitting a sound through her dry quivering lips. "Laurence, you must be mad! We could never be rivals! No man who could find beauty in her baby face, her childish airs and graces, would be likely to seek even passing favor in *my* eyes; thus, no motive for rivalry could by any possibility exist. For foolish striplings—half-fledged youngsters, like yourself, Nellie Hebden may have some fascination. She is welcome to wield it undisputed; I am never likely to care to contest her prize!"

Stung to rage, Laurence imprudently retorted, "Youngsters! striplings!—under which category do you rank Sir Archer Trenton?—by whose passing attentions for one single evening you were so elated, that I remember you thought it well worth while to write me a full account of what you were pleased to term your 'triumph'! And—and what of Charlie Derwent? Is he man or boy? At any rate he admitted to me, three short days ago, that he deemed Nellie Hebden 'the fairest flower of womanhood on earth!' Those were his very words; tax him with them, and hear whether he denies them!"

"He, too!" was the thought which flashed through Ellen's mind, seeming to poison her very blood. For, even as she listened, remembrance rose up of how more than once, while Charlie Derwent had been whispering words of compliment, sugared "nothings"—of which he ever kept a large supply on hand—into her own ear, she had noticed that his gaze wandered, and, following the direction it had taken, she had found it riveted on fair, unconscious Nell as she jested gayly with Laurence at the other end of the boat.

Remembering this, she answered not; only, with a pale smile, curiously regarded her brother.

"Well," she said, at length, "why do you not enter the lists, and do battle with poor old Sir Archer for this jewel among women—this queen of all her sex? He has broad lands and a title, 'tis true; you but your epaulettes, your sword, and strong arm. Nevertheless, in days of romance, these always sufficed to win the fair one with the golden hair, and, I suppose, to provide her with the material necessities of existence ever after. So, Laurence, why do you hesitate? Why not plead your suit with Nellie ere she falls, like a true heroine, into the ogre's clutches? Ogre, in this instance, being synonymous with Sir Archer, whose bride, but for your intervention, she will probably become."

"Sir Archer's bride, indeed!" the Lieutenant retorted, in a voice hoarse with passion. "You judge all women by your own standard, Ellen; and, because *you* would be willing—ay, ready!—to barter youth and beauty for the gold and title of a man almost old enough to

be your father, you deem Nellie Hebden capable of the same infamy. But you wrong her. She is too pure, too innocent to yield her hand where she cannot likewise give her heart!"

"Dear me, how sublime and poetical! Have you been composing sonnets to your lady's eyebrow, recently, Laurence, that words form themselves into rhythmical measures upon your lips spontaneously? But you are bold in assertions. Who shall say that Nellie's heart, as well as her lily-white hand, may not become Sir Archer Trenton's lawful possession? After all, the man is hardly forty. To be her father he must have married young," she added, with assumed gayety, in low, speculative tones. "She *may* love him some day—who can tell?"

"I can tell!" thundered Laurence. "She loves me, and I love her better—ay, a thousandfold—than life itself!"

"Indeed!—how strangely pathetic! Well, why not ask her at once to be your wife, before the ogre—Sir Archer I mean—makes good his claim to the prize? You have your epaulettes, and your sword and youth, and a strong arm, and innumerable other valuable possessions, as I before reminded you, to offer the lady of your love, even if—even if you have nothing else wherewith to begin housekeeping."

"Ellen, you may jeer—you may sneer at me! I tell you that I love Nellie; yet having, as you say, nothing but love to offer her, I—I must be patient for a time, and trust to Fate, and pray that her heart may remain true to me until some day when I can ask her father for her hand. Till then, I am too true a man—'perniless stripling,' though you justly term me—to seek to extort any promise from her. If she loves me, she will not listen to Sir Archer, nor to any other. If she does not—well, then she will become the bride of some more fortunate man. Only Heaven knows how entirely I love her! Yet will I leave her free."

Then he turned, and left her.

Laurence never clearly remembered in which direction he wandered for some hours after that.

It mattered little, however, whether his footsteps tended north or south. Go where he might, his heart, his brain revolved but one painful problem.

When he returned home late that still summer evening, the air was full of a subtle, delicious fragrance. The happy birds twittered on every bough; the placid waters murmured monotonously ever the same low, soothing song; the heavens were roseate with the last rays of the setting sun.

Yet Laurence Humphrey, paler, sadder than his wont, was oblivious of the quiet beauty of the scene, indifferent to the voice of Nature.

He had even aged, it seemed, since the early morning hours.

His step had lost its elasticity; his voice its hearty, boyish ring. His brow was clouded, his dark eye lusterless.

He had done fierce battle with his inner self, and come forth from the internal conflict conqueror.

His course was clear.

"Love," he whispered to himself, "can be no crime, so long as it is pure and strong; even though lovers may be held in some measure culpable, if they are young and portionless."

Yet he would not try to tear his love for Nellie from his heart. He would rather strive to foster and cherish it, in spite of time or absence, ever fresh and fervent in his breast.

For love is youth's best, noblest privilege; one of which he is robbed all too soon by the remorselessly advancing years. And despite his slender means, his manhood but so recently attained, the young Lieutenant whispered to himself that he could, and had every right to love, as boldly as though he had already donned a colonel's uniform, and were as old—well, as Sir Archer Trenton himself.

"What did such men know of love?" Laurence asked, with a throbbing heart, and the

life-blood coursing madly through his veins. "Let them talk of settlements and marriage portions, of festivities and wedding feasts, if so it must be; but leave the young, the ardent, ay, even the penniless, to discourse reverently, with bated breath and quickening pulse, of the grand, enchanting mystery of eternal love."

Yet, adoring Nellie as he did, he yet determined that, as a man of honor, he would err did he seek to obtain from her a promise to become his wife.

His future was so vague and uncertain, he dared not ask a pledge. Did she love him she would wait for him.

For the rest, he would leave her free—untrammelled as the mountain roe, free as bird upon the wing.

All honor to young Humphrey for his manly, brave decision, which dignified his youthful years—ay, even the uniform upon his breast.

Yet, alas! had he proved less worthy, much sorrow had been spared, many tears remained unshed.

But what is coming, who can tell? Who dare hope to pierce the mystery infolded in the bosom of the far-off years?

Mortals can but ponder, and, pondering, decide that which seems to them, short sighted as they are, the best course to pursue.

Yet, even then, alas! how frequently those poor blind children of circumstance, erring in their judgment, faltering in their footsteps, stumble, fail, or fall.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MEMBER PROPOSES.

"SIR ARCHER TRENTON, did you say, mamma?" asked Nellie, who, upon her knees before an open chest, was "putting to rights," she said—a phrase, in this case, synonymous with absolute confusion. "Oh, I cannot come down-stairs! See my hands, my hair!" And laughing, she held up the dingy little members, and tossed back the unbound glory of her tawny, glittering curls. "You must entertain Sir Archer yourself to-day, mamma, and say I'm very busy, and far too untidy to appear."

But, to the girl's surprise, Mrs. Hebden answered seriously, in grave and anxious tones.

She was thoroughly annoyed to find Nellie in so desperate a plight, and bade her rise at once, change her dress, and smooth her hair; for Sir Archer's visit was to her.

She must go down to the drawing-room at once.

"If I must, I suppose I must!" cried Nellie, springing to her feet. "But then, indeed, mamma, I'll go down just as I am. You would not have me keep Sir Archer an hour, and then appear—like the lady upon whom we called last week—freshly shining from soap and water, and a painfully neat air, which would most distinctly say, 'Please, I've made myself look smart, to do honor to your lordship.' No, I'll tell him the exact truth. I dare say even Lady St. John is a wee bit untidy sometimes."

And laughing merrily, Nellie darted off, despite maternal remonstrances; and when Mrs. Hebden, a few moments later, reached the drawing-room, it was a somewhat singular tableau which greeted her.

The tall, grave, faultlessly-attired man of the world—whose mounted groom was walking the sleek horses up and down before the Villa gates—held his hat and gloves in one hand, while the other was clasped tightly between Nellie's trembling palms.

He was looking down upon her, with a strange air of tender absorption in her childish narrative; while she, gazing up with fearless look, told "how ashamed she was to be caught in so terrible a plight. But as it was only you, Sir Archer, why, I thought you would forgive my appearing as an untidy little fright!"

"As an untidy little fright!" he echoed. "Well—even so, fair, beyond all others, in my sight."

And then, when Mrs. Hebden entered, the Baronet explained that he had come in the

hope that Nellie would remember her promise, of showing him all the beauties of the Villa garden—the dove-cote, her small conservatory, and even the windings of the river-bank.

Then, indeed, she left him for a moment, to smooth her curls, seize her broad garden-hat; and a few minutes later, this incongruous pair passed through the Villa gates together, to saunter down the grassy bank.

"Our river," as Nellie termed the streamlet which meandered, like a silver ribbon—bordered on either side by shady, whispering trees—for some miles through richly-wooded lands, was well worth the trouble of inspection; but I doubt whether the tall, grave Member, as he walked beside the girl—his hands clasped behind him, his eyes bent to earth—were conscious of anything in Nature half so fair as the one delicate face by his side, heard aught so full of harmony—despite the hum of bees, the birds' gay carol—as the ripple of her childlike laughter, the music of her careless words.

It was not long before he paused, and taking both small hands in his, began: "Miss Hebden, there is something which—which I scarce know how to say!"

Then, seeing that for a moment she glanced up, with a timid, fawn-like air, he smiled, and dropping both her hands, asked, "Do you remember *this*?"

He took it carefully from his letter-case, and held up before her that portion of the "wishing-bone" which had fallen to his share.

"Nellie, do you recollect? May I—may I ask you now to grant the boon?"

"Of course you may, Sir Archer! I will grant it, if—if I can."

"Ah, if you can, dear Nellie! Heaven knows, I scarcely dare to hope!"

Then he took her hands again in his, and gazing down upon her, whispered tenderly, "Nellie, can you—will you give yourself to me? Nellie, could you learn to love me some day as my wife?"

He had been very gentle with her—more, oh, far more, like a father than a lover, because of a latent fear that such words from his lips might scare her.

Yet, indeed, ere his whisper had died away upon the still, summer air, Nellie had started from his side, pale and breathless, looking up at him.

"Your wife, Sir Archer! Oh, you cannot mean it! I—I am such a child! Your wife! Oh, Sir Archer—you did not mean it! Unsay those words! You could not surely mean that?"

"Yes, Nellie. I mean, indeed, that I love you better than life itself. Better than woman ever before was loved by man. I mean, that to have you for my—my own, Nellie, would be the greatest happiness I could ever know; that to shield you from every breath of care and trouble would be the proudest object of my life; to endeavor to insure your happiness, the only aim or end that I should care to keep in view. Nellie, look up at me, dear child! Tell me, may I dare to hope?"

But Nellie had sunk low upon her knees among the long dry grass, covering her face with both her hands.

The tall Baronet dropped beside her, gently endeavoring to withdraw those trembling fingers.

"Speak, Nellie! May I hope?" he pleaded.

"Oh, Sir Archer, you are so old!" she almost sobbed. "And, indeed—indeed I am only a child! And—oh! it is quite impossible—quite!"

He had prepared himself for some such resistance on her part, and, placing himself beside her, told her, with infinite patience and gentleness, of the life which he could offer her; of the great world, where she would shine, a bright, particular star; of the pleasures, and the gayety, and the brilliant position which might be hers. Told her, above all else, how strong and pure was that abiding love, which could never wander from her, e'en in thought; but which would guard and shield her, guide and cherish her, until death should part them.

"Nellie, think for some days of all that I have said to you. You shall tell me then—not now—whether you are afraid to trust yourself to me."

Then, for the first time, she withdrew her hands at the heart-breaking earnestness of his tone, and looking up through her tears, faltered, "Indeed, Sir Archer, I—I love you dearly; but—oh, I could never be your wife!"

"Not now—not now, perhaps, dear Nellie. But why *never*? Never means so long a day!"

"Oh, because—because of Laurence Humphrey! It is *he* I love; and—and he loves me!"

And then, with the impetuosity of a child, Nellie held outstretched her tender hands. Unconsciously, Sir Archer drew her toward him: and sobbing unrestrainedly, Nellie flung her head down upon his shoulder, weeping like a tired, over-excited child in the safe haven of paternal arms.

"Oh, Sir Archer, mamma will be so angry! You must not say a word to her of—of this! Nor about—about Laurence Humphrey! I have told no one in the world but you. And, indeed, I love you, dear Sir Archer; you are so kind—so kind and true!"

It is strange what blows childish lips can inflict on strong men's hearts. Yet Sir Archer Trenton bore his punishment as a brave man should; pleaded that the disappointed parents would in no wise endeavor to coerce the child, for she was very young, and he was patient. He could wait.

Moreover, in his subsequent interview with Mr. Hebden, no allusion to Nellie's childish confession, no insinuation in respect to his youthful rival, escaped Sir Archer's royal lips.

CHAPTER X.

PARTING.

THEY stood together, hand in hand, gazing silently at each other—Nellie Hebden and Laurence Humphrey.

All around was still. The pale, chaste moon looked pitying down upon this youthful couple—in whose hearts was anguish, in whose eyes despair.

Each young breast swelled with bitter pain—the intolerable agony of a first great sorrow; each felt that life itself was henceforth valueless—for must they not part on that dread morrow?

Laurence had received a sudden recall; his regiment was ordered to Dublin, and before the sun rose on the following morning, he would start upon his journey.

Yet Fate, which had so ruthlessly interfered to cut short love's young dream, nevertheless granted one last boon to those whom she was about to sunder.

Mr. and Mrs. Hebden, it chanced, were absent at a dinner party; hence, at a given signal, Nellie was free to steal noiselessly out into the garden, to enjoy the sad luxury of a few last words alone with her lover. The indescribable hush of a summer's night resting on all things, seemed to sanctify the very air they breathed.

There was a strange solemnity in the voices—ay, and in the hearts—of this hapless twain, in keeping with the silent majesty above their heads—and with the mysterious repose in which Nature herself seemed wrapped.

"And, Nellie, you will not forget me—never, never?"

"Never, Laurence! While my pulses throb, my heart will beat for you alone!"

"And should they wish you to marry another?"

"Should they bid me marry a prince, I would *die* sooner than prove untrue!"

"Yet I dare not ask you for one word of promise. Nell, remember *always*, you are free. Years may pass; and, passing, leave me with no better claim to you. Oh, Nellie, dear one, it is cruel—cruel! Yet what can I say?—what can I do?"

"Say—only that you love me. Do—nothing, but trust me."

"Yet, Nellie, I feel that it was unwise, and—and wrong, almost, for you to think of me."

To the first blush of your youth and beauty, you might well aspire to a coronet. Why—why should you waste your spring-tide thinking of a hopeless, penniless, absent soldier?—you, who will count lovers by the score, why should you bestow regrets upon me?”

“Only because I love you, Laurence. It would be better, far, to grieve for you than to rejoice with any other!”

“Heaven bless and keep you, darling Nell! Remember, always, that I leave you free. I ask no promise—seek no pledge. I tell you, only, you are dear to me.”

“Laurence, that shall suffice!”

“Farewell, my own—farewell!”

They tore themselves asunder—only to meet and embrace again, as lovers ever have, and ever will do. For is it not an old, old story, seemingly admitting of but little variation? Yet ever different—never twice the same.

Nellie and Laurence believed that never before had lovers experienced *quite* the same bitterness as that which now filled their own cup. It seemed to them that henceforth life itself would be void and motionless; for the sun would each day set, to rise on a morrow fraught with pain.

Yet they were mere feeble straws on the waters of Fate, whirled at will by the cruel tide; powerless to grapple with Circumstance; with no choice but to succumb. And like other miserable lovers before their time, as well as after, they survived that terrible ordeal, which each had assured the other must render existence henceforth intolerable.

As the end of the week succeeding young Humphrey's departure drew near, Nellie scarce knew whether she most dreaded or desired the slow flight of the leaden hours. For each departing brought nearer an event feverishly anticipated; yet one which, as it passed away—fulfilling Time's inevitable law—must leave the world—ay, life itself, she fancied—a mere yawning void, a measureless tract of meaningless weeks and months, unredeemed by any single point of interest to mark one solitary day as of deeper moment than its fellows.

It had been determined, after many doubts and righteous misgivings on the part of the honorable young soldier, that once—only once—might he indulge the exquisite felicity of writing to her whom he loved. The idea of a clandestine correspondence had been rejected as utterly unworthy of himself, derogatory to Nellie, and an insult to her guileless faith and trust in him; whose bidding she would not have hesitated to fulfill, regardless of moral injury to her own nature.

Laurence, however, proved deserving of this girlish confidence, and was brave enough to explain that it would be base on his part to contemplate dragging her through those undesirable labyrinths of deception, intrigue, and hypocrisy, to which a clandestine correspondence but too surely leads.

He would not have her lower her moral standard, depart from her simple code of maiden integrity of thought and action, on his behalf. One single solace would he permit to both; and not even this point was yielded without much perplexity of the mental balance.

It was agreed, however, that on his arrival at Dublin he should write once—only once—to assure Nellie of his welfare; this letter would be boldly addressed to The Villas; after that, nothing would remain to cheer the disconsolate lovers save precious memories and faith in one another.

It chanced that Ellen Humphrey spent the last day of Nellie's terrible suspense (for the morrow was to bring the feverishly anticipated letter) with her friends at the Villa. Though the girls had been inseparable of late, drawn together apparently by a mutual sorrow—for to both the void left by the lieutenant's absence was one not easily filled—Ellen found home intolerably dull after the young man's presence was withdrawn; there was no longer an excuse for Charlie Derwent's visits, boating excursions were suspended, and many

an engagement which her brother had facilitated must now be foregone. Moreover, Ellen was strongly attached to Laurence, in her own selfish fashion; she was proud of him, was dull without him, and “passionately fond of him,” as she phrased it, although powerless to understand that real affection considers ever the welfare of its object in preference to its own.

And now that separation had brought to a summary conclusion “the nonsense,” as she termed it, between Laurence and her friend, Ellen was almost disposed to forgive Nellie the offenses of which she stood unconsciously condemned.

Each girl had sustained a cruel loss; the sunshine of both lives for a time, at least, was missing; and so, forgetful of late differences, they drew nearer to one another, each more than ever dependent on the society of her solitary companion.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Ellen, wearily, gazing out through the open window at the darkening twilight sky; “I wish it were to-morrow. However, there will not be long to wait.”

“Why to-morrow?” questioned Nellie faintly, with a beating heart—for was it not the morrow that her own thoughts traveled toward? That glad to-morrow, which would bring her tidings more precious far than any which would reach the Queen upon the throne!—for to-morrow she should hear of Laurence's welfare, receive fresh assurance of his love.

“Why, to-morrow,” answered Ellen, slowly, still gazing absently afar, “we are to receive letters from Dublin; Laurence will have reached his destination, and be able to send a proper account of himself. So far, we've only had bald scraps of information, a few hurried lines to my mother, a telegram to papa; but to-morrow he will write to me, and has promised to let me know much that I am more than anxious to hear.”

Nellie could scarcely resist the impulse which possessed her to throw her arms about Ellen's neck, and thank her for such tender solicitude on behalf of the absent one.

Nellie's sympathy might have been less strongly enlisted, however, had she guessed that it was, as usual, Ellen's own interests that were uppermost in her thoughts.

Previous to her brother's departure, Ellen had made a confidant of him in respect to her love affair with Charlie Derwent, who at length, it seemed, had formally declared the state of his affections. His immediate prospects, however, were such that Ellen dared not counsel any direct appeal for her father's sanction, such a course being but too likely to tend to a complete severance of the lovers. To Laurence, Ellen had confessed all; and the Lieutenant, though opposed to his sister's hopes, had reluctantly undertaken to break the unwelcome news, and exert his influence with their father in order to obtain permission for Derwent to visit openly at the Villas, if no better terms could be obtained.

Colonel Humphrey and his son had enjoyed a long midnight conclave, after the remainder of the household had retired, on the night previous to Laurence's departure; and it was then, when the prospect of impending separation might chance to have softened the paternal heart, that the Lieutenant had promised to advance his sister's cause so far as lay in his power—with what result she was to learn by letter in due course, for Laurence was to start upon his journey before the sun rose or the ladies were astir.

The Humphreys were not an emotional family; it had therefore been agreed that the young soldier could as well take leave of mother and sister overnight, in the general discomfort inseparable from departure in the gray, chill dawn of a summer morning.

Only meager intelligence had since been received of the absent one's movements.

Ellen's anxiety, therefore, for the morning's post would have been but natural even had she been inspired by disinterested affection only.

Nellie never doubted that such, and such only, was the inspiration; and, when she part-

ed from her friend that night, experienced a sentimental, girlish satisfaction and consolation during the still hours of her own suspense from the reflection that another shared her solicitude—one other heart beat thick and fast in expectation of the morrow.

And Nellie retired some hours earlier than her wont, in order that “to-morrow might seem nearer.”

It is more than doubtful, however, whether the means she adopted were not destructive of the end she had in view; for when morning dawned, and she descended to the breakfast-table with a white face and palpitating heart, the effects of anxious, sleepless hours were so plainly depicted on her child-like features, that her mother forthwith inquired whether she felt unwell.

Nellie hastened to defend herself from the mere imputation of indisposition with such unnecessary emphasis that Mrs. Hebden found reason to supplement her first offense by gravely demanding what had given rise to such unusual and inexcusable irritability.

Then, for sole answer, the over-wrought and over-excited girl rose quickly from the table that her mother might not notice the scalding tears which had gathered unaccountably in her eyes.

Alas, poor Nellie!

CHAPTER XI.

NELLIE'S FIRST LOVE-LETTER.

“POOR lamb—poor lamb! And, mercy on us! if that there ain't a love-letter, my chris'en'd name ain't Mary Jane!”

Alias Janet, in the Hebden's household.

The morning had passed much as usual at the Villa, and not until the luncheon-bell sounded at one o'clock was the fact of Nellie's prolonged absence noticed by any of the family.

Then it was that Mrs. Hebden dispatched Janet in search of her young mistress, and, having inquired for her vainly next door, the maid proceeded to seek “Miss Nell” nearer home—with what success may be gathered from the exclamation recorded above, which burst from Janet's lips as she pushed open the door of a small summer-house, and, entering, discovered Nellie stretched full length upon the ground.

In her hand she still grasped a written paper.

This, Janet, with the discretion of her kind (reserved, generally, for similar emergencies), disengaged from the poor, cold fingers, folded carefully, and stowed away in her pocket, murmuring the while, “Ay, ay; Miss Nell's no different to the rest on 'em, so it seems—so it seems! More's the pity, say I—poor, dear lamb! I wonder now, what sort o' gent he may chance to be!”

All this had happened more than an hour ago.

Since then, Nellie's temples had been bathed with eau-de-Cologne—she had been tenderly undressed, and put to bed.

She lay now apparently unconscious, though with closed eyes, moaning softly to herself; while Mrs. Hebden, half distracted, marveled why the note dispatched to the doctor had not received attention—well-nigh, indeed, before it had reached his hands.

Poor deluded parents! how often does it happen thus! They hastily resort to physical restoratives, while regardless of the possibility of more desperate mental needs.

Janet's perception respecting matters of this sort was of the most acute order. Upon the first opportunity, therefore, true to the instincts of her class, she glanced through the letter taken from Nellie's hand, and, although the general tenor escaped her, the signature sufficed to determine her to “keep a still tongue to the missus, and say naught just awhile. Time enough when Miss Nellie mended; then the poor dear could please herself.”

Thus all clew was wanting to the mystery of Nellie's sudden attack. Mrs. Hebden could only inform the doctor she had noticed the girl's pallor and general disquietude that morn-

ing. Beyond this no evidence was forthcoming.

From the poor little patient herself nothing could be elicited. For some hours she lay quiet, calm, even, it might have been supposed, save for the closed eyes and the ceaseless moaning, which reminded those about her bed of some poor, stricken animal in hopeless, patient pain.

As evening drew on, Nellie became restless, tossing from side to side, and raising her parched and fevered hand to her burning brow.

Before night closed in the girl was delirious. When with morning came the doctor, he laid his hand upon her head and pulse; he shook his head, and cleared his throat.

"Madam, this is brain fever. The child will need your utmost care. Are you sure—quite sure—that you can in no wise account for this attack?"

Then, indeed, Janet trembled; but, as she argued mentally, disclosure of facts now "could do nobody no good, and might get me one month's warnin'; and then who'd see to Miss Nell? The next as might happen to come wouldna serve the poor dear half so well as I like to do. Happen what happen must, I now must hold my tongue!"

There was only one other who had a clew to the solution of this enigma. That one likewise held her peace.

The facts are briefly these. We will not attempt to describe the sickness of anticipation with which Nellie (for the first time, probably in all her guileless life) waited at the garden gate in order to waylay the postman, nor the rapture, almost akin to pain, with which she received from his hand a stout, white envelope, bearing the Dublin postmark, and sealed with crimson wax. Long afterward she remembered, as in waking hours one recalls a half-forgotten dream, how, at the very time, she noticed in the old man's weather-beaten hand another letter, similar in all respects, addressed by Laurence to his sister Ellen. And even, as with a beating heart, Nellie turned away, and sped across the lawn with the light, fleet footstep of the fawn, a confused sense of satisfaction was uppermost in her mind that Ellen, too, was happy. Even at the suprem moments of her life, Nellie Hebden could remember others.

The sequel may, perhaps, best be explained by quoting this letter *verbatim*.

Thus it ran:—

"THE GARRISON ARMS, DUBLIN,
Aug. 9th, 18—.

"MY DEAR ELLEN,—As, unhappily, I have but very few moments to devote to you, forgive preliminaries, and let me at once proceed to the subject of most importance to us both, taking it for granted that you have already heard something of my proceedings up to this date. In a word, then, forgive my saying that now I am parted from you, and can take a clearer, more dispassionate view of matters than when listening to you, I am of opinion that the sooner you endeavor to forget all that has passed during the last few weeks, the better. The awakening from love's young dream must ever be a cruel trial, yet better endured now, perhaps (while your heart is so young that it can easily forget), than after long years, possibly, of hope deferred and tedious suspense.

"If I could see any prospect of this marriage taking place in two, three, or even five years' time, I would say love on, and wait. As it is, however, my affection is too sincere, my desire for your real welfare too genuine, to admit of my counseling hope and patience when I see nothing beyond save disappointment.

"To a nature like yours, the injury of prolonged suspense must prove incalculable. You believe now in the possibility of constancy and endless faith; but these would certainly expire under the disillusionary process of a prolonged and indefinite engagement.

"You will have many admirers, too, Nell; your heart is susceptible, your fancy easily pleased. Forget, therefore, this pleasant, foolish episode, and fix your affections upon some other worthier of you; some one whose suit your father will see no reason to oppose; some one who can 'name the day,' and has the wherewithal to 'buy the ring.' Poverty, it is true, is no crime; yet, believe me, it is a great disadvantage in a lover, from the effects of which he would be no less likely to suffer than yourself. Indeed, it is doubtful whether an affair of this sort is not even more injurious to a fellow than to a girl like you. Denied the legitimate delights of courtship, he yet feels himself under some restriction in his intercourse with the other sex. His opportunities and temptations must be manifold; and who can answer for results, despite the best intentions?

Believe me, therefore, it will be better, far better, to write 'finis' voluntarily to the story now, with your own hand, than to wait until circumstances leave you no choice but to do so—until, may it not even be, your lover's changed demeanor or cooling ardor convinces you that the constancy of man cannot always satisfactorily withstand the influence of his surroundings. You will say such sage advice falls strangely from my lips, but it is for you I am thinking, not for myself. Our natures differ essentially. What would be practicable for me would be impossible in your case, and thinking of you, and for you, I can only repeat, 'Forget, forget, forget!'

"Forgive counsel so cruel. Believe me, dear, it is not without pain that I make what you may consider a cold and callous suggestion, but I am convinced this is the only right, proper, and desirable course to be pursued. The other night, when I left you, I endeavored to moot the subject to the governor; he would not hear even the most distant allusion, and I am convinced would be, ten years' hence, as inexorable as now.

"I sincerely hope, dear, that you will not misconstrue this that I have written, but will believe that my words are dictated by consideration for your welfare only. Keeping this in view, I have endeavored to discharge a very painful duty.

"Believe me, yours affectionately,

"LAURENCE HUMPHREY."

Such was the missive which had at length rewarded poor Nellie's week of anxious expectation. Her first love-letter, awaited with such agonies of suspense; clutched with a joy that was well-nigh pain; opened with fingers cold and tremulous from agitation; with a heart beating to suffocation; gazed at with eyes to which the blinding, joyful tears had sprung at mere sight of the loved one's handwriting, affording, as it did, tangible assurance that she was his—that he was hers!

How terrible must have been the reaction which followed upon that blissful moment, when she pressed the still unopened letter to her lips, may be easily imagined.

Its effects we already know. She read those cruel words, in plainest, boldest characters, unfalteringly throughout; amazement lent her strength, and not until the latest line was reached did a sound escape her blanched lips. Then, "Oh, Heaven!" she murmured, scarcely above a whisper; and even as the murmur died upon her lips, seemed as though some crushing blow suddenly descended—a blow merciful in its cruel force, for it sufficed in one brief second to still sensation, and render her insensible even to the bitterness of grief, the agony of astonishment, which in that first moment was keener, sharper, than even actual pain.

Meanwhile, the key to this enigma, although beyond poor heart-stricken Nellie's reach, may yet, without further preamble, be presented to the reader.

At the moment when the girl fell prone to earth, with that cruel letter in her hand, an icy blade seemingly transfixing her very heart, Ellen Humphrey tossed her embroidery aside, and opened with some eagerness that envelope with the Dublin post-mark, handed her with several other letters.

"Good boy," she murmured; "he has kept his word. Now, then, to know my fate."

For one moment a smile, half derisive, yet wholly pleased, curled the full ripe lips; and "How affectionate absence makes one!" escaped her, half aloud.

But scarce a minute later, she threw back her queenly head among the cushions of her chair, and burst into a peal of loud, uncontrollable laughter.

To her, the riddle was simple of solution. At a glance she beheld the true complexion of affairs. The letter in her hand ran as follows:—

"GARRISON ARMS, Dublin,
Aug. 9th, 18—.

"DEAREST DARLING NELL—Indeed, I know not whether grief or joy predominates as I take up the pen to redeem my promise—joy at even forming the dear letters of your name—grief that it must be the first, last time I write them.

"Darling Nell, what can I say to you? Nothing, save that I love you, now that we are parted, ten thousand times more passionately than when I held you in my arms beneath the golden stars. Nell, I cannot live without you! I have had no tranquil moment since I left. You are ever before my sight; your memory never absent from my thoughts!

"Sweetheart, I feel utterly unmanned—I, who should be brave and counsel patience for both our sakes; I, who should bear silently the burden that you are left to share with none! I dare not trust myself to write further, lest I should say words which later I might wish to recall, and urge you to a course which, in a calmer moment, I might regret.

"Were I to write a thousand pages, there could be but one refrain to my song—I love you, dearest, love-liest, with a devotion which shall be lifelong. Remember ever that I am yours; that I pray that some day you may be mine. Yet, if your heart should wander from me, recollect that I left you free. Time and absence, which may change you, Nell, can but increase my love. Until death I shall be, indeed, with every throb of my heart, every pulse of my being, unalterably thine,

"LAURENCE HUMPHREY."

Such was the effusion which elicited uncontrollable laughter from the full, red lips of Ellen Humphrey. In her eyes, no doubt, the composition appeared ridiculous; poor Nellie, most probably, would have regarded it as sublime. As we all know, however, there is but one step between the two extremes.

The explanation is simple enough. Like many another eager, hasty correspondent, Laurence had slipped the letter intended for Nellie into the envelope addressed to his sister. He had been guilty of the fatal error of writing all his letters, instead of sealing and addressing each in its turn as he completed it.

The habit is general enough, and perhaps many a one who reads these lines may have either benefited or suffered from a similar act of carelessness. To none, let us hope, has it been productive of results so disastrous as to poor, simple-minded Nellie Hebden. To her it never occurred to doubt or question. She accepted facts as they were, or seemed to be, and succumbed beneath a blow she was too fragile to withstand.

Notwithstanding that Ellen enjoyed to the utmost the cards placed by Fate thus unexpectedly in her hand, yet she by no means decided in that first moment of heartless mirth to enact the base part circumstances afterward led her to pursue.

She rejoiced, indeed, to have been placed in full possession of Laurence's secret, and cherished a perhaps not unnatural feeling of resentment against the girl who had so studiously withheld her confidence in the past. As we know, moreover, she was jealous of guileless, undesigning Nellie's influence over the sterner sex in general, and opposed to any tender interest existing betwixt her and Laurence in particular.

Some hours later, while she still pondered the vexed question of how she might best turn this strange circumstance to account, Janet burst in somewhat uncereemoniously to deliver a message from Mrs. Hebden, who sent word to Ellen of Nellie's sudden seizure, and begged to see her, in order to learn whether she could offer any clew to the prevailing mystery.

Then it was that Janet made full and true confession to her eager listener.

"Oh, Miss Humphrey! I durstn't say one word to the mistress, but I do believe that 'ere brother of yours is at the bottom of all this!"

Then she produced the letter which had had so fatal an effect, and related everything which had transpired since.

As Ellen read it through, it would be difficult indeed to describe the furious conflict of emotions to which it gave rise.

This, then, was the counsel Laurence gave her, while himself pursuing a diametrically opposite course of conduct! Well, the cards were in her own hands now. Her wrongs might be avenged at last!

In one moment she decided—irrevocably, for Ellen's was not a vacillating nature. She read the letter once again, refolded and handed it back to Janet, with a calm, unmoved expression of countenance.

"Oh, miss! won't you keep it? I dunna what to do! The paper seems to scorch me, and yet I can't well tell o' Miss Nellie, and your brother, too! And, oh! the missus will be that angry! Don't you think, miss, it would be better for you to interfere?"

"Indeed no, Janet. I can truly say that I know nothing about this affair. Miss Nellie has kept me altogether in the dark, and I am as much surprised as shocked. You had better keep the letter, it seems to me, for the present. I see nothing to be gained by disclosure now; and, when Miss Nellie is better, give it back to

her, and—time enough then to see what can be done."

Then Ellen rose to accompany the maid next door, reflecting that, even if she desired to rectify this momentous error, while Nellie lay in her present condition, explanation of any sort was quite impracticable.

CHAPTER XII.

FROM THE BRINK OF THE TOMB TO THE STEPS OF THE ALTAR.

THE snow lay deep upon the ground; the Villa gardens were buried beneath a frozen mantle of spotless white; and within, the aspect of affairs in both quiet households was as completely changed as the scene without since those ripe summer days when we left Nellie wrestling with despair.

Nellie herself to-day lay wrapped in shawls and furs upon a many-cushioned couch, drawn before a glowing fire in her mother's pretty drawing-room.

The girl is much altered since we last saw her. If possible, she has grown more fair; or is it only the delicacy of convalescence which gives her an air so plaintive and irresistible?

Nay; surely her whole expression is different now to that which her childlike features wore in those far-off, happy summer days, when Laurence Humphrey won her heart. There is a shadow beneath her eyes now; in the pupils themselves, a mute, fathomless wonder; about her mouth, a few grave lines; the tender lips are set in rigid curves. Ah! these sad, short months have made a woman—a stern woman, even—of the girl we left

"Standing with reluctant step
Where the brook and river meet,"

on that charmed border-land, where child and woman join forces shyly, with innocent, unconscious hesitation.

Yet surely that was long ago. Looking back, it seems to Nellie that the events of last summer are already buried deep beneath the sorrows and experiences of half a lifetime, at the least.

Toward the close of autumn the girl first began to rally. It was then, in the twilight of one September day, that her mother, standing beside Nellie's bed, tendered fruit and flowers, which every alternate day arrived from the Manor House, with solicitous inquiries from the Baronet respecting the little patient.

"Sir Archer himself is down-stairs. Will you send your thanks, dear Nellie?"

"No, mamma; only—only I think I should like to see him for a little while. I feel so strong and brave."

Even as she spoke, her white lips quivered; but the mother only too gladly did her bidding.

Then, as the Baronet, pale almost as Nellie herself, stood before the little, trembling invalid, holding both her hands in his tender grasp, Nellie, looking earnestly up, questioned, with all a child's good faith, "Sir Archer, do you love me still?"

"Nellie, dearest, can you ask? If possible, you are dearer to me in these days—when my heart is never free from anxiety on your account—than formerly, when I knew you well and happy—happier in my absence than my presence was ever likely to make you! Never doubt again, Nellie. Remember that eternity itself could not change my love for you!"

"Then, Sir Archer, if you please, I am ready to be your wife!"

Thus, then, it was settled, to the boundless delight of all parties interested, save the poor pale bride elect.

Yet she never faltered in her determination. Once or twice, indeed, when her mother attempted to elicit her confidence, and uneasily inquired the meaning of so sudden a change in her child's resolution, Nellie authoritatively waived all discussion.

"Mamma, I intend to marry Sir Archer, and hope to make him a good wife."

She took but little interest in the preparation of bridal finery, however; and in

these days immediately preceding the auspicious 1st of the new year, which was to witness the consummation of Sir Archer's hopes, Mrs. Hebden constantly bewailed the loss of Ellen Humphrey, who would have rendered invaluable assistance at such a time.

For Ellen Humphrey had disappeared from her own little world forever.

While Nellie lay fighting the fierce battle 'twixt life and death, the elopement of the colonel's daughter with Charlie Derwent had been the principal subject of discussion in the gossiping circles of Luton.

Young Derwent, finding his home prospects hopeless, had determined suddenly to cast in his lot with that of an Australian uncle, who wrote proposing that his nephew should join him forthwith. Would Ellen consent to a hasty marriage, and go out to Australia as his bride?

Ellen, weary of Luton life, eager for excitement, seized upon so novel an opening with avidity. The subject was duly mooted to the colonel. His indignation was, however, boundless at the mere suggestion; and, once the lovers were convinced that there was no hope of the authorities relenting, the notion of an elopement, affording as it did a sensational ending to her Luton career, appeared to Ellen the simplest means of escape from all difficulties and perplexities.

Thus, too, would be obviated all necessity for that explanation, which it must be confessed Ellen had been anticipating as one of the unpleasant consequences of her own duplicity; for surely on Nellie's recovery, investigation of some sort must ensue. She would probably write to Laurence, or he again to her.

Ere that time arrived, however, Ellen Derwent was upon the seas, and the nine days' wonder was forgotten in the little world where-in she had played a leading part. Only poor Mrs. Hebden, hopelessly perplexed by the conflicting claims of dress material, Chambery gauze and Indian muslin, sighed regretfully that Ellen was missing just when she might have been of such immense service.

Once, only once, did the pale *fiancee* manifest the faintest interest in the bustle and excitement of preparations of which she herself was the moving cause. Neither the wedding-day nor the wedding-cake, the arrival of wedding presents, nor the discussion of the wedding feast, elicited from her one word of comment, either of satisfaction or dissent. Only once, when her mother sat silently filling in invitation cards, (from the long lists which the Member and Mr. Hebden had carefully prepared), Nellie looked up from the book before her, and through dry lips, in a grave, unnatural voice, said, "Mamma, I wish an invitation to be sent to Laurence Humphrey. Please, don't forget."

"I will send one if you desire it; but, of course, my dear, he cannot come. Fancy *your* being married, and Ellen Humphrey a bride already far away! It seems but the other day that you two and Laurence played together—three noisy children in the nursery overhead."

"Ah! but many years have passed, and many, many changes happened, mamma, since then."

The wedding-day came, as all days come, no matter how slowly they may seem to approach. Such a *cortege*, in truth, Luton had never seen before, only the small bride seemed to play her part throughout the ceremony like a woman in a dream. This was decidedly unbecoming in one who had been selected for so great, so unprecedented an honor, for the Trentons were one of the oldest families in England, and Sir Archer might have selected a wife from among the fairest of the Upper Ten. That he had chosen Mr. Hebden's modest, unassuming little daughter was matter therefore of great marvel, despite the girl's childlike purity and beauty, which would render her conspicuous in any circle in the land.

To-day she said the responses in a cold, grave, unflinching tone, distinctly audible

throughout the crowded edifice, where breathless silence reigned.

It was over, and Sir Archer warmly clasped his passive, snow-white bride, the usual embraces and congratulations followed, and then the names alone remained to be signed.

Many had pressed inside the vestry; the little room was full. The Baronet, tenderly solicitous, bent forward as he handed his fair young wife the pen.

At that moment what grim specter did Eleanora, Lady Trenton, see, to make her eyelids quiver, her heart's-blood freeze within her veins? Her rigid fingers relaxed their hold upon the quill—a brief convulsion shook her frame—she staggered suddenly, and must have fallen, save that a young, stalwart soldier, from among the throng pushed forward, and caught the fainting figure before even the Baronet could stretch forth his eager arms to receive his childlike bride.

"Ah, Laurence, is it you?" Mrs. Hebden murmured. "Place her here, and some water, please, at once. She is over-excited, poor darling! She will be better presently, no doubt."

This circumstance, of course, invested the proceedings with additional interest.

No one deemed it at all singular that so young and delicate a creature should be suddenly overpowered by the weight of honors thrust upon her.

"She will be better presently!" all echoed, turning smilingly away, as mother, father, husband, friends, hung anxiously about the unconscious girl. Surely she was left in loving hands.

Laurence Humphrey had already left the church. He was missing at the breakfast-table, and had, indeed, already started upon his most miserable journey back to quarters before the wedding-bells had concluded their rejoicing peal.

Poor Laurence! And, alas! poor Lady Trenton!

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

UNTIL the sweet spring sunshine cheered the English shores, Sir Archer kept his child-wife abroad, "seeking her missing roses," as he termed it, in half the foreign capitals of Europe.

May found the strange, incongruous pair once again in Dover; and here the too-solicitous husband insisted they should rest a few days ere Nellie underwent the fatigue of further journeying.

In this—as, indeed, in most other proposals—she acquiesced, with the unreasoning indifference of a spoiled and weary child. Yet she tried her best, poor Nellie, to requite in some measure the Baronet's affection.

And, apparently, he was quite content; better pleased, it seemed, to minister to Nellie's every whim—receiving in return, at best, the poor guerdon of a fleeting smile—than had another woman flung before him the richest treasures of a boundless love—satisfied, as some such natures are, with the mere acceptance of his homage.

Men smiled good-naturedly, with a strange mixture of envy and contempt, at Sir Archer's infatuation for his pale, fragile wife; women arched their brows, wondering "what on earth a man like grave Sir Archer *could* see in that insipid, baby-faced girl!"

What recked he? Nellie's mere presence by his side formed his all-sufficient joy. Besides, was she not always gentle, winsome, kind?—lifting her fair countenance ever, with calm serenity, to receive his still passionate caress—even as an unresponsive child accepts those doting parental kisses which she considers rightfully belong to her?

And later—well, later she would surely come to love him as—even as he would be loved!

Not yet, however! Nellie was still so young, so childlike, her husband told himself, it was not meet she should awaken yet to read her

woman's heart aright, or stem the tide of passion.

Life later on, of a surety, would atone for aught lacking in these meridian days of his existence.

Well, it should suffice! He was content to wait!

"My fair one has never surely looked more lovely than to-day!" pronounced Sir Archer, as the carriage waited before the door, and his wife stood fastening her gloves, while he scrutinized admiringly her faultless toilet—one of many he had himself selected during their stay in Paris from among the great Worth's masterpieces.

And Nellie, smiling faintly back at him, glanced at her own reflection in the mirror, murmuring, with innocent complacency, "Yes; I think my dress is nice!"

It was a brilliant scene to which they were forthwith borne.

The "Ninth" was to sail upon the morrow for some Indian station, hence the municipal authorities to-day entertained the officers at a farewell luncheon; while, in the evening, all the neighboring *elite* would gather in the garrison ball-room, where the "Ninth" promised royally to return the hospitality received from local magnates during a protracted stay in those pleasant quarters.

Nellie regarded the glittering scene—bright with the costly dresses of the ladies, the uniforms of officers, the sparkle of silver and glass upon the magnificently spread tables—with the listlessness of utter indifference. She had become already more than accustomed—almost weary, indeed—of these brilliant spectacles, which, in earlier days, her wildest flight of imagination had never dared to picture that she herself might ever grace.

But here, as at most other festivals, where she fluttered by her tall, grave husband's side, there was a nameless charm, an indescribable grace, about "airy faery" Lady Leonora which riveted general attention, despite the more majestic beauty of many a high-born dame.

During the last half-hour a gray-headed colonel of Dragoons, who had conducted Lady Trenton in to luncheon, had been exerting all his fascinations to the utmost in her behalf, apparently with but limited success, for her ladyship was little more than monosyllabic in reply—often, indeed, offering no rejoinder save the faint acquiescence of a smile.

But presently her sleeve caught and swept to earth a fragile glass from off the crowded table.

A young officer sitting next her on the other side raised the fragments, and released some portion clinging still to her costly lace.

"Oh, thanks!" she said. "I am so sorry!"

And, turning as he raised his head, further speech deserted her, for Nellie found herself confronting Laurence Humphrey.

He had, in truth, recognized her from the first moment, when, all unconsciously, she had taken her place beside him; but, deeming she had purposely ignored him, the young man had attempted no formal recognition.

He had now the advantage of the position.

Nellie, amazed and disconcerted, could but gaze blankly up at him with piteous, questioning looks.

The first shock for him, however, was already over.

He looked calmly, gravely down upon her, his head half inclined in the courteous, deferential attitude of a man who waits the pleasure of an unknown lady.

"Laurence!" she faltered, brokenly, through ashen lips.

"Lady Trenton?" he answered, in tones of cold interrogation.

"Is it—is it possible?" she questioned. "How came you here? Your regiment is in Ireland!"

Her surprise was so great in that first moment that she forgot her supposed wrongs—his crime—her own new-born wifely dignity;—forgot all, save that in Laurence Humphrey's

eyes she saw once more her own reflected—that once again she listened to the charmed accents of the voice which had stolen to her heart of hearts—ah! *could* it be but a few short months ago?

"As you observe," he answered, with cruel, unmoved calm, "my regiment is in Ireland—my late regiment, I should say. I have exchanged, however, into the 'Ninth,' and sail for Calcutta on Saturday."

"Ah, no!" escaped her, brokenly.

And, just then—"Lady Trenton," murmured the bearded Colonel on the other side, "may I not offer you some champagne?"

Far more graciously than her wont, she smiled, as with trembling fingers, she raised the glass, and drained it at one draught.

Her voice was steadier now; the blood had come eddying madly back to her heart, and even tinged her cheek with a faint color, which throughout many months had been a stranger there.

"I—I did not know," she said, with sudden dignity, turning once again to Laurence, "that you were going abroad. I should much like to speak with you!"

"When and where you please."

The words were few, the tone was solemn; but at that moment, as their glances met, something gleamed suddenly in his—a ray of tenderness irrepressible—which went like sharp steel to Nellie's breast, threatening altogether to disconcert her.

"To-night—shall you be here?" she little more than whispered; for, in truth, breath well-nigh failed her then.

"Will you reserve the eleventh dance for me?"

Lady Trenton bowed her head.

At that moment some one opposite claimed attention, and presently a general move ensued. The Baronet sought his wife, Lieutenant Humphrey devoted himself to a portly dowager on his right, and Nellie moved through the crowded rooms on her husband's arm, in a half-bewildered state.

CHAPTER XIV.

CRUEL BLISS.

"OUR dance, Lady Trenton, I believe!" And Lieutenant Humphrey, of the 9th, bowed low that dark, closely-cropped head of his, which Nellie had been vainly seeking since first she entered the brilliant throng.

A purple-faced Cabinet Minister, who had enjoyed the distinction of conducting Lady Trenton through the last quadrille, reluctantly released the gloved hand, which her ladyship transferred to the arm of of Laurence Humphrey.

"Will you dance?" he questioned, briefly.

Mutely she shook her head; just then words failed her.

Without comment he threaded his way through the gay crowd, nor even glanced at his companion, until a dimly-lighted fairyland of ferns and flowers was reached—where the Chinese lanterns burnt fitfully above the shrubs, and the perfumed fountains cast high their glittering spray.

Here, then, they paused by mute consent.

Humphrey released Lady Trenton's hand, and, folding his arms, setting his back against a colossal vase of porphyry, looked sternly at her.

Ah! how changed!—how cruelly changed within the last few months!

"And now?" he questioned, grimly.

Nellie, gazing up, shivered, and for a moment clasped both her hands before her face; perhaps, that she might shut out from view those darkly luminous eyes of his, which were, alas! but seldom absent from her mind, and even haunted her dreams. To see him once again—to hear once more those deep-loved tones—to touch his hand—ah! surely, this was much of certain good, of actual joy. Yet she had hardly deemed he would dare regard her thus, with something of menace surely! He so deeply erring—she so sinned against, yet, woman-like, forgiving! Ah! at sight of him

resentment, anger, all had vanished—pride itself well-nigh forgotten. Had he but deigned to tell her gently why and wherefore he had done her such cruel wrong, blotted the sunshine from out her young life forever—why, even then, standing there a hopeless, miserable wife, Leonora Lady Trenton would have pardoned all, because he had loved her once.

But before those fiercely glaring orbs her own sunk now dismayed. She stood before him (the man who had sinned against her beyond all power of reparation) in her costly, shimmering robes of richest satin, draped with priceless lace, with the diamonds glistening about her creamy throat, twinkling in her shell-like ears, crowning her childlike head—she, attired like an empress, thus stood cowering now before him, over whom little Nellie Hebdon, in her gingham frock, had ruled absolute, despotic.

Ah! how humbling is the force of a mastering passion! Yet, Laurence, glancing down upon her, read, in her attitude and unwonted meekness, only the evidence of past treachery and present shame.

"You wished to speak to me; I await your pleasure!" he said, harshly.

Then she looked up quickly, stung to recollection and a sense of righteous resentment by something in his tone. She threw back her head with an imperious gesture that she had learned of late; and thus Lady Trenton answered the man who had made havoc of her life.

"'Tis true," she said; "yet have no fear that I desire or seek explanation of—of the past. I would ask you only one—one solitary favor. Lady Trenton asks that you will return to her the—the foolish offering of Nellie—Nellie Hebdon—(perhaps, though, you scarcely recollect?)—with whom you amused yourself last summer. A worn-out locket—a shabby trinket—perchance, however, 'tis long since lost; or you forget, perhaps?"

Oh, the unutterable pathos of those trembling, broken tones!

"Nay, Lady Trenton. I have forgotten not one single incident of that too brief past. Yet I would ask—"

"You will send it back?" she interrupted, eagerly.

For the remembrance that he, Laurence Humphrey, still possessed that long, fair tress of Lady Trenton's hair had grown of late intolerable, oppressive.

"No," he answered, sternly; "I will not send it back. I will return it to you now—at once! See you, I have it here!"

He thrust his hand within his vest, and drew it forth, holding the battered, bruised, and worthless thing—the only trinket of "her very own" which Nellie had dared abstract from her slender store, in those already far-off days, when her earthly possessions were positively none.

Ah! the scrap of faded blue ribbon hung about it still.

With a strange feeling at her heart, a choking in her throat, Lady Trenton held out her trembling hand.

Was it, indeed, with a feeling of guilty joy that henceforth she would have, and would hold throughout life, something which he had cherished, something hereafter inestimably precious, having lain so near his heart?

"Let me—let me at least keep the hair?" he began hoarsely.

There was positive agony of entreaty in those last words.

His fingers closed convulsively again upon the trinket, even while he held his hand outstretched.

"Dare you ask that question of—of Lady Trenton? Lieutenant Humphrey forgets what is due to himself, and—and me."

She grasped the locket; but instead of relinquishing it, he caught her slender wrist, and held her fast, gazing upon her with an expression before which she shrunk and shivered.

"Oh, Heaven!" escaped him, brokenly. "The cunning of the serpent, with the apparent in-

nocence of the dove! Can it be that with women it is ever thus? With angel face and child-like form—a heart black as night within! Oh, Nell, Nell, you might have spared me this!”

He released her suddenly, staggering back a step, and shading his brow with one hand, that even she, just then, might not note the agony depicted on his features.

Marveling strangely, she yet dared not pause to think. She must hurry forward with the task which she had come there purposely to fulfill.

“Souvenirs, on either side,” she said, in a calm, unnatural voice, “are fortunately but few. They may, therefore, be the more easily disposed of. I am prepared to render what I claim. Give me back my locket, and—and receive your letter! The first—last love-letter you wrote to Nellie Hebden!”

He took it from her hand, and crushed it ’twixt his fingers.

“You do well,” he said, hoarsely, “to give me back the sole memento of past folly. Yet this—this last, unmerited, needless insult I will never forgive you, Lady Trenton! Hear me! Nellie I forgave—albeit she broke my heart, ruined my life, marred existence itself for me. Poor fickle, faithless child—unlearned it may be, even yet, in the mysteries of human nature—what should she know of her own mind, its strength or weakness, or of a strong man’s love? Her temptation was great; moreover, she was in no wise bound—I left her free. A proud lot was offered her; she had been more, perchance, than woman, had she relinquished all the material good things of this world for a—visionary dream. So I hardly blame, and can forgive her; though pardon me if—if I am unduly harsh in saying she might have made the blow less crushing—broken the shock in some slight measure—sent me back but one brief line, ere that brutal printed message reached me—jeering at me, as it seemed, in brazen, golden letters—mocking my misery with emblazoned arms and coroneted monogram! Yet,” after a momentary pause, he continued, bitterly, “Nellie I forgave, because a love like mine can pardon well-nigh all. And she, poor child, was too young to understand. But—”

“But,” she interrupted, piteously, “how could she—dared she answer, by one word or sign, a letter like—like *that*? Indeed, she had no power—lacked strength, and—”

“It is over!” he interrupted, sternly. “Let it pass. I have forgiven treachery in a child; but—but this last wanton exercise of your woman’s power, Lady Trenton, I will never pardon. I will even pray that—that Heaven may some day make you suffer the torments that you so well know how to inflict on others! You might have left even the locket in my hands; it need scarce have proved injurious to your peace of mind, considering that ere a third day’s sun should rise the trinket would have tossed, with him you wronged, upon the stormy ocean. But this—this,” upholding the letter in his hand with something of momentary menace, only to crush it then again more fiercely ’twixt his fingers—“to return this *that*, was utterly unworthy of you—unworthy of the girl, of the child I loved! Why not have burned it, if—if, indeed, it troubled you by reminiscences of the past?” he hissed, with sudden passion, close to her delicate ear.

“Ah! because, perhaps—because I had not courage to consign to the cruel flames the only precious relic—precious, despite its venom!—of happy bygone days—days whose memory is all I have now left to love!”

She covered her features with her hands, and the last words escaped in a bitter moan upon the scented air.

Mechanically Laurence now unfolded the paper, smoothing out its creases with the unconscious air of a somnambulist.

“Oh, how I loved you, Nell! Heaven help me! how I love you, Lady Trenton, still! Let us read this letter; let us laugh together over

words written by fingers tremulous with passionate tenderness, yet scanned by you, perchance, with lips already curling with girlish indifference and contempt. Say, how did it all happen, Lady Trenton? Surely, you loved me *once*?”

“Once, and for ever!” she murmured, faintly, scarce conscious of the meaning of words which surely it was not meet should fall from the lips of Sir Archer’s wife.

“Listen!” he said, and would have read; but, suddenly, “Great Heaven!” escaped his bloodless lips; and he reeled backward like a man who had received an unexpected blow. “Nellie,” he gasped, “how—when—where did you get that letter?”

“The day you promised it. I—I myself received it from the postman’s hands!”

“Ah! it cannot be! That—that was her letter—Ellen’s. She—she, then, has yours! I see—I understand it all at last, far, far too well!”

A brief explanation followed—if, indeed, that word applies to monosyllabic questions and answers, to incoherent cries and passionate gestures, which yet sufficed to make the treacherous story plain to those two eager hearts, tricked and cruelly betrayed.

And then, suddenly, “Great Heaven be praised!” young Humphrey cried; “Nell, you were not faithless, after all!”

“Faithless?” she echoed, brokenly; but at that word he caught her to his breast. He crushed her in his arms, and, looking up, she forgot to struggle, but raised her sweet, pale, quivering lips to his, murmuring, through blissful tears, “Oh, Laurence, how could you doubt me! I have loved you always—always, even when you seemed so cruel, and false!”

They clung to one another with the passionate tenderness which only youthful lovers know, stammering breathless queries, to which swift caresses came as sole response. They had reached the earthly paradise which surely it is not granted mortal foot to tread beyond one brief, happy, transient moment, in this dull world beneath the sun.

To them it seemed the perfect ecstasy of that breathing space, which brought not only remembrance of their love, but also confidence and complete forgiveness—atoned for all the anguish of the past. As for the future—

“Laurence,” she cried, suddenly releasing herself with one quick movement from his arms—“Laurence, we had forgotten! Yet surely it cannot be! Ah, Heaven be merciful! Tell me, is it true? am I—am I—*Sir Archer’s wife*?”

A groan escaped young Humphrey’s lips. He staggered from her like a drunken man, shutting out with both his hands the sudden anguish he had seen upon her features.

But little more passed between them, and in a very few minutes Nellie, with something of her former childlike helplessness of voice and mien, pleaded, “Take me—please take me to Sir Archer!”

Then, as he stooped to raise the fatal letter, which had wrought the utter misery of those guiltless lives, she held out her small hand, murmuring, plaintively, “Ah! give it back to me! I have held it dear, in spite of all! It was my first, last love-letter. Give it back to me—it is mine!”

And, snatching at it like a passionate child, she thrust the now torn and crumpled paper within the bosom of her dress.

Ere the ball-room was reached they met the Baronet searching in every quarter for his wife.

“Sir Archer, take me home!” she cried, stretching forth her cold, gloved hand. “Oh! I’m very tired—very ill! Take me—take me home!”

He smiled upon her with tenderest indulgence.

“You are over-excited, little one. This must not chance again.”

But, even as he passed her arm through his, Nellie turned her head back suddenly.

“Laurence,” she said—“Laurence, dear,

good-by!” holding up her sweet, pale face for a farewell kiss, with the simplicity of a child who claims, despite of scene or circumstance, a brother’s parting caress.

Laurence bent, and kissed her gravely.

“Nell, Heaven keep you, and—good-by!”

The Baronet paused patiently, the unsuspecting witness of last greetings which he deemed it but natural a child like Nellie should exchange with the playmate of her earliest years, bound for a journey to far-off seas. Yet he smiled, thinking to himself that, despite the pity, he must caution his little wife that such displays must not be indulged too frequently in public by Lady Leonora Trenton.

CHAPTER XV.

FAREWELL.

WRAPPED in soft furs and fleecy shawls, despite the warm shelter of her husband’s arms, Nellie complained bitterly of the cold throughout their short homeward journey.

Then she sent her maid away, too weary to disrobe; and Sir Archer, to please her fancy, soothed her mood, held her, still in his tender arms, before the blazing fire in her luxuriously-furnished dressing-room.

And thus, from her guileless lips, he learned every incident that had transpired—heard of past anguish and present joy—joy that Laurence was proved at last guiltless of all crime.

Heard all!—ay, even read that cruel yet now all-precious love letter, which Nellie thrust again into the warm shelter of her white breast.

Heard all—and as her father might, mindful only of her sorrow—repressing every sound or sigh that might betray the hopeless anguish of his own stricken soul, as he listened silently to Nellie’s story.

And thus, with her fair arms wound about his neck, looking up at him—her husband—his child-wife murmured, with pathos indescribable, “Laurence said that we must never meet again; but, indeed—indeed, I could not live without him now—now that I know him true, and that he loves me, even as I love him. Oh, Sir Archer! you will take me, or you will let me go with Laurence to India when he sails? You will—I know you will! For you always say that I have been a good little wife, whom you love to please.”

“My darling Nell, it cannot be!” he whispered, huskily, smoothing her soft curls back, and pressing his hot lips to her marble brow. “Nell must be my good, wee wife ever; and that—that would be hateful sin!”

Very tenderly he reasoned with her, explaining the impossibility of the boon which she had never doubted the too-indulgent Baronet would have been eager to grant.

For how had she ever pleased him better than by hazarding every unreasonable demand which had presented itself to her girlish fancy?

When she understood at last, she burst into agonies of such bitter weeping, that Sir Archer, standing powerless, could scarce restrain his own tears.

“I cannot live without him! I shall die—I know I shall!”

Such was her piteous refrain through the sad hours of that never-to-be-forgotten night.

And when at length her husband’s arms placed her tenderly within the bed, her fevered tossings, and incoherent moaning cries made his heart stand still with dread recollection of those dreary autumn days when Nellie Hebden had so nearly glided away from life forever.

When she slept, at last, she passed from sleep into that dull, unconscious stupor which fills with anguish all loving watchers by sad sick-beds.

Sir Archer never left her side until, on the third day after that, she opened her violet eyes, and looked calmly out upon the world, with the piteous, questioning gaze of newly-restored consciousness.

Then, when her husband spoke to her, she remembered all, fancying this was the morrow after that long night of pain.

And then, with pallid lips and pleading tones, she begged Sir Archer would bring Laurence to her. She must see him once again, she said, before the cruel ocean yawned betwixt their sundered hearts forever.

When he found it otherwise impossible to pacify her, the Baronet told her the truth. The 9th had already sailed; but Laurence Humphrey first, and at his own request, had been led to Nellie's bedside, and reverentially pressed his lips upon her fevered brow, as she lay unconscious there.

When all this was made clear to her, she shed no single tear; only bitterly she cried, "Why, oh, why did I wake again?" Later, she moaned, feebly, still tearless, "Oh, I am tired, tired! Surely the night has come! Draw down the blinds, and close the curtains. I am weary! I want sleep! Kiss me, Sir Archer! Good-night! Good-night!"

He did her bidding now, as always. Saving once, indeed, was there aught he had denied her ever?

He made all still and night-like about her room. He smoothed her pillow; and, bending over her, "kissed her good-night," as the children say, while she clung lingeringly to him in a long caress. Then she sighed; her head fell back, and it seemed as though sleep were already overtaking her.

The Baronet watched long and silently, sitting by the fitful fire-light which alone illuminated the shadows of the darkened room. Yet, as twilight closed without, he rose, and stole once more to the bedside. Nellie's restless moans and tossing had subsided. She lay, indeed, wrapped in tranquil slumber.

Then the Baronet, greatly comforted, crept noiselessly back to his place.

He scarcely stirred throughout the watches of that long night—not altogether sad to him, because of the new-born hope. The worst was surely past. She knew all now; naught was to be dreaded from suspense; and, when she awoke, would rise up refreshed, and begin life anew.

Ay! but never more to bear the burden of unwelcome honors; never again to attempt that for which she was all unfitted; never more to strive to play a part beyond her strength.

As gray, chill dawn crept in between the curtains, the Baronet shivered. Surely it had grown strangely cold! Had he been dozing?—for, in truth, he felt as though a spectral presence had passed him close by.

All anxiety lest sleep might indeed have overtaken him at his post, Sir Archer rose, and stole once more toward the bed where Nellie yet lay still and motionless.

How peaceful her rest!

He drew the laced coverlet aside with reverent fingers, light as any woman's. He glanced down upon her lovingly, as she lay curled like a breathless marble incarnation of the sweet goddess of Repose. Both hands were folded upon her breast; and surely upon her angel features there lurked the shadow of a smile?

How fair—how marvelously fair—as she lay there! And how white and colorless, after her long conflict with anguish and pain! Surely it must be the sickly shadow cast by breaking dawn which lent her rounded cheek that dread, mysterious pallor?

Ah, he must press his warm and hungry lips to hers—his own, his wife, his treasure!—just to assure himself that she was flesh and blood, and not a breathless statue, wrought by cunning hands and tools.

Not even the risk of rousing her could repress that sudden longing which had possessed him!

He would be gentle—very gentle! He might not wake her after all!

He held his breath—he tried to still the beating of his heart, lest it might break that peaceful slumber—as he bent his head toward his adored one!

Nay, in sad truth, kiss of human lips could

never wake again to life the soul which had already winged its flight to heaven!

Nellie's troubles were over—her brief battle fought.

The Baronet's Bride was dead!

And thus was her memory handed down to posterity forever. In the annals of his house she lived henceforth, and was known to generations then unborn, as "Sir Archer's Bride"—she, who, indeed, had been scarce a wife!

And when, in time, a marble monument was reared—with sculptured angels, with folded wings, weeping on either side—the country-folk one and all made answer to inquiries on this head—

"There sleeps Sir Archer's Bride!"

THE END.

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